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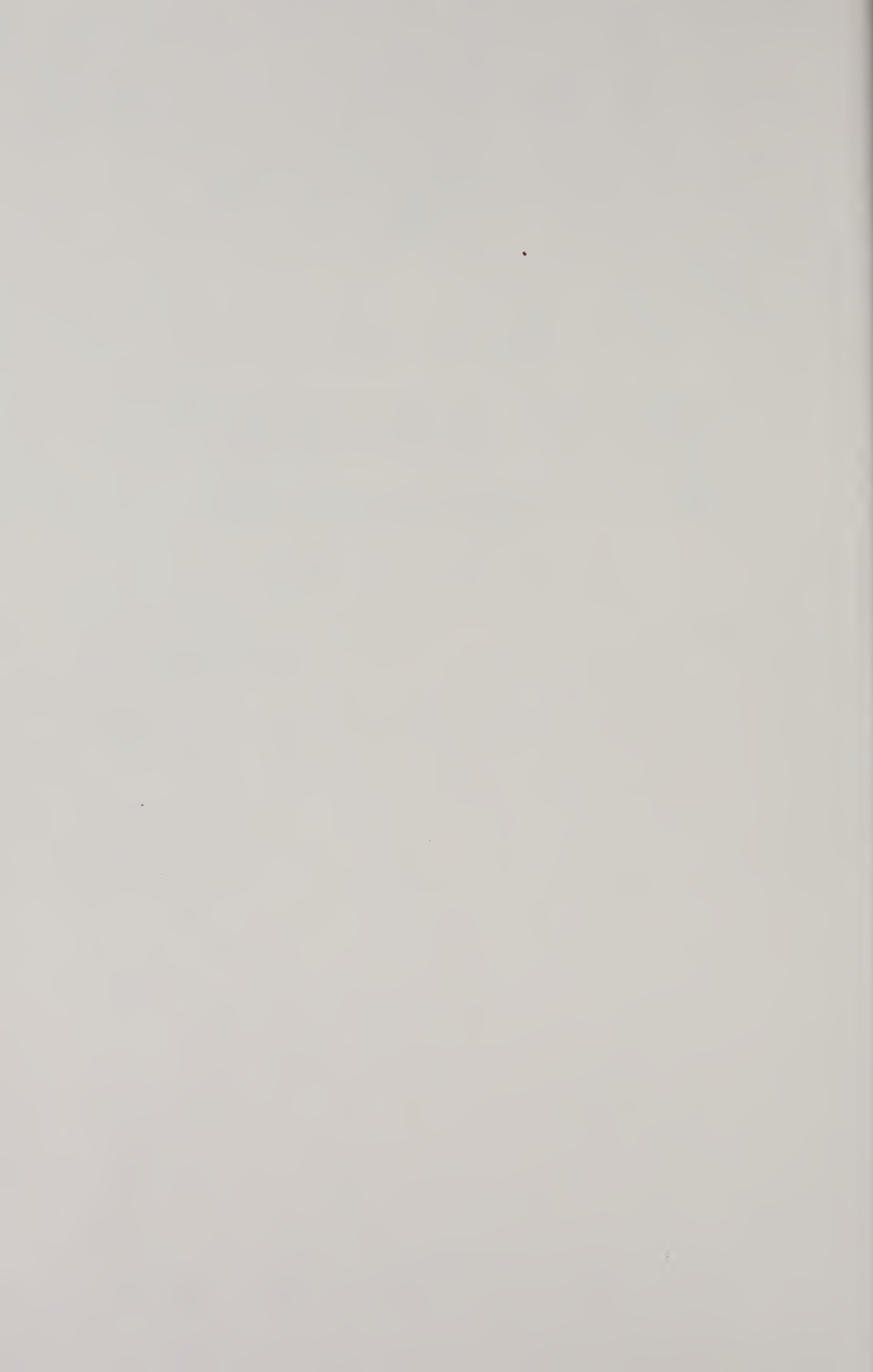
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THE DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS  
IN THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM  
Melanchthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?



THE DOCTRINE OF THE  
SACRAMENTS IN THE  
HEIDELBERG CATECHISM  
Melanchthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?

LYLE D. BIERMA



PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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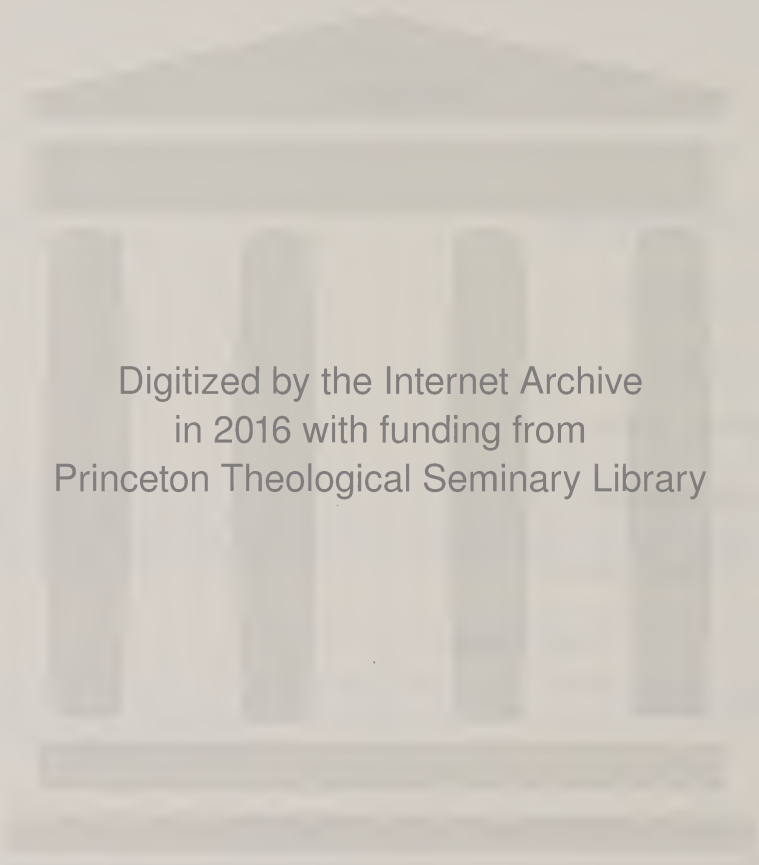
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## Editor's Foreword

Graham Greene—and undoubtedly there were others before him to do so—remarked that being baptized and raised in the Roman Catholic church was, in this respect, like getting malaria: there might be long periods when you think you have gotten over it, but since it is in the blood the condition will return full force. Depending on one's ecclesiology, I suppose, that comparison is either a comfort or a curse. In any event, there is tenacity of memory, a perduring ethos, which belongs to one's subsequent history, be it in altered appropriation of the tradition or professional rebellion against it.

The same applies to the lasting effects of the Heidelberg Catechism on those willingly or unwillingly steeped in its structure, simple strength of doctrine, personal warmth, and provocative questions. I think of the classical first question and answer which serve over and again to ground comfort and trust where they belong. I also think of the treatment of the decalogue in the largest section, on thanksgiving. Others will think of different compelling features of this widely used Reformed document.

Is the Heidelberg Catechism, however, primarily a Reformed document? That query is parallel to asking if the Augsburg Confession is primarily a Lutheran document. The answer in both cases is that they were intended to confess and teach the Catholic faith and its behavioral consequences, and so made the corrections, where they felt necessary, to alternative teachings and ethics. The inevitable territorial, diplomatic, strategic, and political considerations helped shape the motivation and the tone of both the Augsburg Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. On the whole, and with a prevalence that makes the exceptions all the more glaring, these two documents are irenic in intent and authorship.

Lyle Bierma's study contributes to the accurate placement of the Heidelberg Catechism on the spectrum of those who came to be known as Reformed and Lutheran churches and theologians. We find ourselves con-

fronted again by the pivotal role many expected of Melanchthon in the relations between Lutherans and Reformed, and confronted again by the shift that had already occurred by the time of his death. Ursinus's and Olevianus's particular touches resulted, at the very least, in the kind of consensus whose breadth and whose differentiation between essential and secondary matters was lost in subsequent denominational fragmentation.

Dr. Bierma is Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

David Willis

## Abbreviations

See bibliography for publishing information.

CHP	<i>Confessio Helvetica Posterior</i>
CO	<i>Ioannis Calvini Opera</i> ( <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> , vols. 29–87)
CR	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> , vols. 1–28 ( <i>Philippi Melanthonis Opera</i> )
Ma	<i>Catechesis maior</i>
Mi	<i>Catechesis minor</i>
OS	<i>Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta</i>
ZW	<i>Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke</i> ( <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> , vols. 88–101)



# I

## The Debate

In the mid-nineteenth century a debate about the origins of the doctrine of the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism erupted in Germany and the United States with the publication of two books in the same year: the second volume of August Ebrard's *Das Dogma vom heiligen Abendmahl und seine Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1846), and John W. Nevin's *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia, 1846). In his history of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Ebrard described the Palatinate Reformation in general and the eucharistic teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in particular as "calvin-melanthon'sche" or "melanthonisch-calvinische"—the product of both Calvinist and Melanchthonian influences.<sup>1</sup> This provoked a lengthy footnote by Heinrich Heppe in his history of German Protestantism six years later. Heppe was pleased that Ebrard had recognized Melanchthon's stamp on the Heidelberg Catechism, but he believed that Ebrard still regarded the catechism in the traditional way as essentially a "reformiertes Lehrbuch." In point of fact, Heppe argued, the catechism is not the least bit Calvinistic; it is "deutsch-evangelisch," or Melanchthonian, through and through.<sup>2</sup>

Heppe's thesis did not go unchallenged. In an 1857 biography of Ursinus

<sup>1</sup> August Ebrard, *Das Dogma vom heiligen Abendmahl und seine Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1846), 2:604, 606. For Ebrard's account of the Palatinate Reformation in general, see pp. 596ff.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte des deutschen Protestantismus in den Jahren 1555–1581*, 4 vols. (Marburg, 1852–1859), 1:446, n. 2. Two years earlier Heppe himself had used the term "melanchthonisch-calvinische" to describe the sacramental doctrine in the Frankfurt Recess (1558), of which the Heidelberg Catechism, in his view, was but a later catechetical form. But he still considered the *source* of the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine of the sacraments to be Melanchthon. Idem, "Der Charakter der deutsch-reformirten Kirche und das Verhältniss derselben zum Lutherthum und zum Calvinismus," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 23/3 (1850): 681, 685, 687–688.

and Olevianus, long thought to be the primary authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, Karl Sudhoff asserted that Heppe had things just backwards: the Heidelberg Catechism, including its doctrine of the sacraments, showed no trace at all of Melanchthonian influence; it was in full agreement with Calvin and the confessions of the Reformed churches outside Germany.<sup>3</sup> Maurits Gooszen, too, believed that Heppe had placed too much emphasis on the Philippist (Melanchthonian) origins of the Heidelberg Catechism. In two books in the early 1890s, Gooszen maintained that the primary influence on the Heidelberg Catechism, particularly on its doctrine of the sacraments, came from neither Melanchthon nor Calvin but from Zurich Zwinglianism, or what he preferred to call "original Reformed Protestantism." The Heidelberg Catechism was written in the spirit of the outstanding exponent of this movement, Heinrich Bullinger, whose "soteriological-biblical" theology was markedly different from the increasingly "intellectual-speculative" approach of John Calvin.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, in the United States, John W. Nevin, professor of theology at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, was publishing *The Mystical Presence*, in which he lamented the decline of the Calvinistic doctrine of the sacraments and the ascendancy of Zwinglian tendencies throughout American Protestantism. Zwingli's relationship to the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century, he claimed, had been "exceedingly external and accidental," whereas Calvin had given a "proper shape and form" to Reformed eucharistic teaching that had carried over into the major Reformed confessions.<sup>5</sup> These included the Heidelberg Catechism, which "occupies the

<sup>3</sup> Karl Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 8 of *Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld, 1857), 113–118. Earlier in the book (p. 5) Sudhoff acknowledged that "gerade in der Lösung der Abendmahlsfrage war Melanchthon selbst durch die Schriften der grossen reformierten Theologen und den Verkehr mit ihnen so bedeutend weiter gefördert worden, dass er entschieden in Glaubensgemeinschaft mit ihnen trat, auch im Lehrausdruck, den lutherischen Standpunkt der Augsburgerischen Confession von 1530 verlassend, sich ihnen so weit näherte, dass nur eine gewisse Unbestimmtheit der Begriffe und Unvollendetheit der Theorie ihn unterschied und gegen Angriffe des Lutheranismus deckte." But for Sudhoff the source of the Heidelberg Catechism's sacramental doctrine was still clearly Calvin.

<sup>4</sup> Maurits Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus: Textus Receptus met Toelichtende Teksten* ["Inleiding"] (Leiden, 1890), x, 149–150, 155–156; idem, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus en het Boekje van de Breking des Broods, in het Jaar 1563–1564 Bestreden en Verdedigd* (Leiden, 1892), 276, 331–332, 401, 406, 408–409, 411. In subsequent notes these two works will be abbreviated as *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* and *Heidelbergsche Catechismus en het Boekje*, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia, 1846), in idem, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, vol. 4 of *Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology*, eds. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Philadelphia, 1966), 42–44.



Calvinistic ground, as distinguished from the Lutheran on the one side and the Zwinglian on the other.”<sup>6</sup>

The most notable response to Nevin’s book was a fifty-two-page review in 1848 by old school Presbyterian Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary,<sup>7</sup> who objected to Nevin’s characterization of the Heidelberg Catechism’s eucharistic teaching as Calvinistic. He insisted that when it comes to the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century can be classified as either Zwinglian, Calvinist, or some mixture of the two.<sup>8</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism falls into the third category, employing language that accommodates not only Calvin’s view but also those of Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bullinger.<sup>9</sup>

Nevin was, in Bard Thompson’s words, “grievously smitten” by Hodge’s attack<sup>10</sup> and two years later published a definitive, one hundred twenty-eight-page rebuttal in the *Mercersburg Review*.<sup>11</sup> According to Nevin, Hodge’s view of the sacramental doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism as “a sort of irenic compromise” between the Zwinglian and Calvinist positions was historically untenable and nothing but the “vanity of the imagination.”<sup>12</sup> By this time, however, Nevin had also read Volume 2 of Ebrard’s history of the Lord’s Supper and no longer referred to the Heidelberg Catechism’s sacramental teaching as purely Calvinistic. Like Ebrard he now considered it an example of “Melanchthonian Calvinism”—the spirit of Melancthon in the terminology of Calvin.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, at least five positions had surfaced in the debate on both sides of the Atlantic: the Heidelberg Catechism’s sacramental doctrine was portrayed as either (1) strictly Melanchthonian (Heppe), (2) strictly Calvinist (Sudhoff), (3) Melanchthonian-Calvinist (Ebrard, Nevin), (4) Zwinglian (Gooszen), or (5) a compromise between the Calvinist and Zwinglian views (Hodge). As the debate moved into the twentieth century, however, the number of positions under discussion actually declined while the number of individuals joining the discussion increased. The debate now focused largely on whether the Heidelberg Catechism’s doctrine of the sacraments was Calvinist, Zwinglian (usually “neo-Zwinglian” or “late-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20 (1848): 227–278.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 230ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” *Mercersburg Review* 2/5 (1850), in Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 267ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 314–315, 376.

Zwinglian," i.e., Bullingerian<sup>14</sup>), or some blend of elements from both traditions. Melancthon was rarely mentioned anymore.<sup>15</sup>

Those arguing for a purely Calvinist interpretation have included E. F. K. Müller, Jan Bavinck, Hermann Hesse, Hendrikus Berkhof, and Fred Klooster.<sup>16</sup> Jan Rohls is probably the best representative of the "modified Zwinglian" or Bullingerian interpretation.<sup>17</sup> Several twentieth-century studies, however, have concluded that the Heidelberg Catechism's sacramental teaching contains elements of both traditions, although in various admixtures. George Richards, for example, maintained that the sacramental teaching in the Heidelberg Catechism is "clearly Calvinistic," yet acknowledged at the same time that in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, at least, "the views of Zwingli and of Calvin are blended."<sup>18</sup> James Good, too, held that the doctrine of the sacraments is Calvinistic throughout the Heidelberg Catechism but was also willing to grant that the Heidelberg Catechism might be intentionally indefinite in this area so as to accommodate both high and low sacra-

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Neuser uses the terms "neuzwinglianisch" and "spätzinglianisch," respectively, in "Die Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 75 (1964): 311, and "Die Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 35/3 (1979): 179, 185. Jan Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften* (Göttingen, 1987), 20, also describes Bullinger's view as "modifizierten Zwinglianismus." On the differences between Zwingli's and Bullinger's views of the sacraments, see *ibid.*, 216–217, 249–250, and Brian A. Gerrish, "Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago, 1982), 118–120, 124.

<sup>15</sup> August Lang, *Der Heidelberger Katechismus und vier verwandte Katechismen* (Leipzig, 1907), CI, acknowledged a distinctive Melancthonian influence on Ursinus's *Catechesis maior* (1561 or 1562), one of the literary antecedents to the Heidelberg Catechism, but found only traces of this influence in the Heidelberg Catechism itself, and none in the doctrine of the sacraments. Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 181ff., identified Melancthon as one of four "fathers" of the Heidelberg Catechism, but, like Lang, did not extend this paternity to the doctrine of the sacraments. In *Zacharias Ursinus: The Reluctant Reformer—His Life and Times* (New York, 1983), 142, Derk Visser claims that "much of the Heidelberg Catechism can be found in the writings of Melancthon," but he is not more specific. Erdmann Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus: Sein Weg vom Philippismus zum Calvinismus* (Neukirchen, 1972), 1, argues that there was indeed a Philippist stamp on Ursinus's sacramental doctrine that was never completely overcome by Zurich and Calvinist influences, but Sturm traces the development of Ursinus's thought only up to, not through, the Heidelberg Catechism.

<sup>16</sup> E. F. K. Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig, 1903), III; Jan Bavinck, *De Heidelbergse Catechismus*, 2 vols. (Kampen, 1913–1914), 2:523–524; Hermann Hesse, "Zur Sakramentslehre des Heidelberger Katechismus nach den Fragen 65–68," in *Theologische Aufsätze: Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag*, ed. E. Wolf (Munich, 1936), 474ff.; Hendrikus Berkhof, "The Catechism in its Historical Context," in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, eds. Bard Thompson et al. (Philadelphia, 1963), 88–89; *idem*, "The Catechism as an Expression of Our Faith," in *Essays*, 113; Fred H. Klooster, *A Mighty Comfort: The Christian Faith According to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 37–38, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 24, 251, 269–270.

<sup>18</sup> George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Philadelphia, 1913), 100, 90.



mentarians.<sup>19</sup> G. P. Hartvelt, on the other hand, did not entirely rule out Calvin's spiritual paternity in the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the sacraments, but he did find real differences with Calvin there and insisted that one must also look to the considerable influence of Bullinger, and perhaps even Boquinus.<sup>20</sup> For Brian Gerrish also, the sacramental theology of the Heidelberg Catechism owes more to Zwingli, and especially to Bullinger, than to Calvin.<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm Neuser, finally, drew a sharp line between the Heidelberg Catechism's second and third sections on the sacraments: the introduction to the sacraments and treatment of baptism (Heidelberg Catechism 65–74) are more Calvinistic, whereas the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (Heidelberg Catechism 75–82) reflects the neo-Zwinglian position of Heinrich Bullinger.<sup>22</sup>

This variety of labels has been applied not simply to the Heidelberg Catechism's general approach to the sacraments but also to the details of its sacramental teaching. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism's claim that nothing is communicated to the participant in the sacrament apart from faith was identified as a Calvinist feature by Sudhoff but as Bullingerian by Gooszen.<sup>23</sup> Gerrish and (implicitly) Rorem both considered as Bullingerian the parallelism between sign and signified in the Heidelberg Catechism's questions on baptism and the Lord's Supper ("as surely as . . . so surely"), whereas Berkhof termed it Calvinist.<sup>24</sup> The spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was also alleged to be both Bullingerian (Gooszen) and Calvinist (Good).<sup>25</sup> And Sudhoff and Rohls viewed as Calvinist and Bullingerian, respectively, the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the sacraments as pledges or assurances of the certainty of Christ's death for the believer.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> James I. Good, *The Heidelberg Catechism in its Newest Light* (Philadelphia, 1914), 54.

<sup>20</sup> G. P. Hartvelt, *Verum Corpus: Een Studie over een Centraal Hoofdstuk uit de Avondmaalsleer van Calvijn* (Delft, 1960), 200, 241; idem, "Boquinus," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 62 (1962): 51, 76–77; idem, "De Avondmaalsleer van de Heidelbergse Catechismus en Haar Toe-passing in de Prediking," *Homiletica en Biblica* 23 (1964): 127–137; idem, *Tastbaar Evangelie*, vol. 3 of *Nieuwe Commentaar Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Aalten, 1966), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 126.

<sup>22</sup> Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 185–186; idem, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 311.

<sup>23</sup> Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*, 116; Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleiding"], 153.

<sup>24</sup> Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 124, 126; Paul Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549): Did Calvin Compromise?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids, 1994), 90; Berkhof, "Catechism as an Expression of Our Faith," 113.

<sup>25</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleiding"], 153; Good, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 76. Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 185, regards as late-Zwinglian (Bullingerian) the absence of any reference in the Heidelberg Catechism to the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper!

<sup>26</sup> Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*, 116; Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 250–251.

At the end of the twentieth century, therefore, there is no more consensus on the origins and theological orientation of the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine of the sacraments than there was at the end of the nineteenth. The only difference is that Melancthon's role has practically disappeared from the discussion. How do we account for such deep divisions of opinion after one hundred fifty years of debate? At least four reasons may be suggested.

First, sometimes different labels have been applied to the same strand of teaching in the Heidelberg Catechism because of legitimate differences of interpretation of the text. Nevin and Bavinck, for example, identify the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the Lord's Supper as "Calvinist" largely because they find there a doctrine of the *substantial* presence of Christ in the Supper (Bavinck) or the communication of the full *substance*, not just the benefits, of Christ to the believing participant (Nevin).<sup>27</sup> For Hartvelt, on the other hand, the Heidelberg Catechism approaches union with Christ not "substantially" but "functionally," that is, as spiritual union with the crucified body and shed blood of Christ only insofar as they communicate the benefits of salvation to us. This, says Hartvelt, is the view of Bullinger, not Calvin.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see later, Calvin and Bullinger did indeed differ on this point; what divides scholars here is their interpretations not of these two reformers, but of the text of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Second, the choice of certain historical labels by some of the scholars we have reviewed appears to have been influenced by the theological and ecclesiastical battles they were waging at the time. Perhaps the most striking illustration of this is Heppe's insistence on the "old-Lutheran" (Melancthonian), not Calvinist, origins of the Heidelberg Catechism,<sup>29</sup> an insistence prompted in large part by his search for an historical basis for the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Hesse in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Zuck, Heppe's unionism led him to stress the impact of the irenic Melancthon and Bucer on the German Reformed Church more than that of Luther or Calvin—a "consistent though incomplete interpretation of the Reformation."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 72–73; idem, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," 379; Bavinck, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 523–524.

<sup>28</sup> G. P. Hartvelt, "Avondmaalsleer," 131–132.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Heppe, "Charakter der deutsch-reformirten Kirche."

<sup>30</sup> Lowell H. Zuck, "Heinrich Heppe: A Melancthonian Liberal in the Nineteenth-Century German Reformed Church," *Church History* 51 (1982): 430.

Sudhoff seems to have fallen prey to the same tendency in his zeal to refute Heppe and defend the purely Calvinistic roots of the Heidelberg Catechism. Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleiding"], 89, n. 1, argues, e.g., that on the question of union with Christ in the Lord's Supper, Sudhoff (*C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*, 86) tries to make the Heidelberg Catechism sound more Calvinistic than it really is by comparing it only with those statements in Calvin's writings that support his case. On Sudhoff's polemic against Heppe, see also Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 64–65.

It is the contention of this study, however, that the two most significant reasons for confusion about the theological ancestry of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82, are (1) the tendency in past scholarship to identify key phrases and points of doctrine in Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 as exclusively Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Bullingerian when in fact they are characteristic of one or both of the other traditions as well;<sup>31</sup> and (2) the failure of past research to recognize the silence of the Heidelberg Catechism on the most divisive sacramental issue in sixteenth-century Protestantism—the relationship between the signs of the sacraments and that which they signify. In other words, the Heidelberg Catechism incorporates those—and only those—dimensions of sacramental teaching that the Philppists, Calvinists, and late-Zwinglians of the day could confess with one voice. What is suggested by the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, moreover, appears to be confirmed by the context. That Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 would highlight areas of agreement and bypass significant differences among Heidelberg's moderate Protestant factions is certainly consistent with what we know of the historical situation in the Palatinate at the time its famous catechism was composed. In the following three sections, then, we shall develop this thesis in greater detail, examining respectively the common ground, critical silence, and historical context of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82.

<sup>31</sup> In this monograph, as in most of the studies already cited, the terms Melancthonian (Philippist), Calvinist, Bullingerian, and Zwinglian are used to refer to general agreement with, and not necessarily the direct influence of, the reformers whose names they contain.



## II

### Common Ground

The section on the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/A 65–82) begins with four questions and answers on sacraments in general, including a definition in Heidelberg Catechism 66:

Q. WHAT ARE SACRAMENTS?

A. They are visible holy signs and seals, instituted by God, so that by our use of them he might make us understand the promise of the gospel better and seal it. This promise of the gospel is that because of Christ's one sacrifice finished on the cross, he will grant us by grace forgiveness of sins and eternal life.<sup>32</sup>

The first half of Heidelberg Catechism 66 follows closely the structure and wording of the corresponding questions in Ursinus's two earlier catechisms, the *Catechesis maior* (Ma) and *Catechesis minor* (Mi):

Q. SAY [WHAT SACRAMENTS ARE] MORE CLEARLY.

A. Sacraments are ceremonies, instituted by God and added to the promise of grace, so that by them he might represent the grace promised in the gospel, that is, the communication of Christ and all his benefits; and so that, as if by visible pledges and public testimonies, he might give assurance that this promise most certainly belongs to and will be eternally valid for all those who use these ceremonies in true faith; and so that those who use them might, on their part, bind themselves to persevere in true faith and piety toward God. (Ma 275)

<sup>32</sup> For the German text of Heidelberg Catechism, see Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, 26–27. I have followed the English translation in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, 1988), 41, but have made a few changes based on the German text.

Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent Heidelberg Catechism question and answer translations are from *Ecumenical Creeds*.



## Q. WHAT ARE SACRAMENTS?

- A. They are ceremonies instituted by God, so that by them, as if by visible pledges and public testimonies, he might remind and assure all believers of the grace promised them in the gospel; and so that they, on their part, might obligate themselves to faith and a holy life; and distinguish themselves from unbelievers. (Mi 54)<sup>33</sup>

All three answers include a brief definition of sacraments ("They/sacraments are . . ."), a reference to their origin ("instituted by God"), God's twofold activity through them (to "make us understand better/represent/remind," and to "seal/give assurance/assure"), and the focus of this signifying and sealing ("the grace promised in the gospel/the promise of the gospel"). According to Gooszen and Neuser,<sup>34</sup> Ma 275, in turn, was based on Philip Melanchthon's definition of sacraments in his *Examen ordinandorum* of 1552: "A sacrament . . . is a divinely instituted rite, added to the promise related in the gospel, to be a testimony and pledge of the promise of grace that is presented and applied."<sup>35</sup> This is certainly a possibility, since Ursinus had used the *Examen ordinandorum* as a textbook while he was teaching in Breslau (1558–1560) and had also referred to and even quoted its definition of the sacraments in his own *Theses complectentes breviter & perspicue summam verae doctrinae de Sacramentis* . . . , a defense of Melanchthon's sacramental position composed in 1559.<sup>36</sup> The pattern and much of the language of this definition appear not only in Ma 275 but also in Mi 54 and thus might have left their mark indirectly on Heidelberg Catechism 66 as well.

Another indication of Melanchthon's possible influence on this section of the catechism is Ursinus's use of the compound verb "remind and assure" in Mi 54, 57, and 64, and in Heidelberg Catechism 69, 75, and its parallels (Heidelberg Catechism 66: "make us understand . . . and seal"; Heidelberg Catechism 73 and 79: "teach us . . . assure us"). As early as the 1521 *Loci*, Melanchthon had insisted that the sacraments have a dual function: not only to "remind" believers of the promises of God but also to "give assurance" to

<sup>33</sup> For the Latin text of Ma 275 and Mi 54, see Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, 191, 208. I have followed an unpublished English translation by John Medendorp and Fred Klooster but have made some corrections based on the Latin text.

<sup>34</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleiding"], 65–66; Neuser, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 311.

<sup>35</sup> "Sacramentum . . . est ritus divinitus institutus, additus promissioni in Evangelio traditae, ut sit testimonium et pignus exhibitae et applicatae promissionis Gratiae" (CR 23:39).

<sup>36</sup> This work is included in volume 1 of Ursinus's *Tractationum theologicarum* (Neustadt, 1584), 339–382. His direct quotation of Melanchthon's definition of the sacraments is found on p. 344. According to Klooster (*The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History* [Grand Rapids, 1982], 125), Melanchthon regarded the treatise as "brilliant."

persons with troubled consciences that God applies those promises to them personally.<sup>37</sup> Even the Latin verbs that Melanchthon had employed in the *Loci* (*admonere* and *confirmare*)<sup>38</sup> reappear both in Mi 54 and in the Latin translation of Heidelberg Catechism 69 and 75.<sup>39</sup>

To conclude from these parallels that the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of sacraments is distinctively Melanchthonian, however, is premature. For one thing, the common structure that we observed in the definitions of the sacraments in Heidelberg Catechism 66, Ma 275, Mi 54, and Melanchthon's *Examen* can also be found in two earlier works by Bullinger, his *Compendium Christianae Religionis* (1559) and *Catechesis pro adultioribus* (1559):

Sacraments are holy actions of the faithful in the church of Christ, instituted by the Lord himself, to be signs and seals of true doctrine. (*Compendium*)<sup>40</sup>

Q. EXPLAIN TO ME WHAT YOU MEAN BY A SACRAMENT.

A. . . . A sacrament is a holy symbol or holy rite, or rather a holy action, instituted . . . by God, . . . by which he also seals and represents what he offers to us. . . . (*Catechesis*)<sup>41</sup>

The same is true of other elements of the text of Heidelberg Catechism 66. The Heidelberg Catechism's characterization of the sacraments as "signs and seals" is found in a different form in both Melanchthon and Ursinus<sup>42</sup> but appears earlier in this form in Bullinger's definition in the *Compendium*.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the compound verb in Heidelberg Catechism 66, "make us understand . . . and seal," is parallel not only to the "Melanchthonian" combination in the 1521 *Loci* and Mi 54 ("remind and assure"), but also to the dual

<sup>37</sup> "Parum est quod admonent signa promissionum divinarum. Hoc vero magnum est, quod certum testimonium divinae voluntatis erga te sunt. . . . Quibus conscientia tua certa reddatur" (CR 21:209).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 208–210.

<sup>39</sup> *Catechesis Religionis Christianae* (Heidelberg, 1563), 26, 29.

<sup>40</sup> "Sunt autem Sacramenta actiones sacrae fidelium in ecclesia Christi, instituta ab ipso Domino, ut sint verae doctrinae signa & sigilla" (*Compendium*, 112r [all references to Bullinger's *Compendium* are from a 1569 Zurich edition]).

<sup>41</sup> "Expone mihi quid intelliges per Sacramentum . . . Sacramentum est symbolum sacrum vel ritus sanctus, aut actio sacra, a Deo . . . instituta, . . . quibus item obsignat et repraesentat quid nobis praestat" (*Catechesis* Q/A 246, 247, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 131).

<sup>42</sup> Melanchthon uses the two terms separately and interchangeably in the 1521 and 1543 editions of his *Loci theologici* (CR 21:210, 847) and in the *Examen ordinandorum* (CR 23:39), and Ursinus describes the sacraments as "signs or seals" (*signa seu sigilla*) in both his 1559 *Theses* (*Tractationum*, 339, 340) and Ma 274.

<sup>43</sup> See n. 40 above.

verbs in Ma 275 ("represent . . . and assure"), which are found in tandem only in Bullinger's catechism ("seals . . . and represents")<sup>44</sup> and in Calvin's Genevan Catechism 1545 ("represents . . . to seal").<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the reference in Heidelberg Catechism 66 to the sacraments as "*visible* . . . signs" is missing in both Melancthon and Ursinus's catechisms but is present in Leo Jud's Zwinglian Shorter Catechism (1541)<sup>46</sup> and again in the Genevan Catechism.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the recurrence of the adjective "holy" in Heidelberg Catechism 65 and 66 ("Holy Spirit," "holy gospel," "holy sacraments," "holy signs and seals"), also absent in Melancthon and Ursinus's catechisms, does appear in the corresponding questions and answers in Jud's Zwinglian catechisms,<sup>48</sup> Bullinger's catechism,<sup>49</sup> and the more eclectic catechisms of a Lasco and Micronius.<sup>50</sup> To ascertain any precise literary antecedents of the definition of sacraments in Heidelberg Catechism 66, therefore, is next to

<sup>44</sup> See n. 41 above.

<sup>45</sup> "figurat . . . ad obsignandas" (Genevan Catechism Q/A 310, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid [London and Philadelphia, 1954], 131 [OS 2:130]).

<sup>46</sup> "sichtbare bildner" (Shorter Catechism [*Ein kurtze Christliche underwysung*] Q/A 199, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 129).

<sup>47</sup> "visibili signo" (Genevan Catechism Q/A 311, in *Theological Treatises*, 131 [OS 2:130]).

<sup>48</sup> Jud's Larger Catechism ("Catechismus. Christliche klare vnd einfalte ynleitung in den Wilenn vnd in die Gnad Gottes," 1534) makes reference to "heiligen . . . Zeichen" and "heiligen Pflichtzeichen" (Q/A 93, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 129), and his Shorter Catechism to "heilig Euangelium" (Q/A 152, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 122).

<sup>49</sup> See n. 41 above.

<sup>50</sup> *De cleyne Catechismus, oft Kinderleere, der Duytscher Ghemeynte, die te Londen is* (1552), an abridgement by Micronius of an earlier catechism by a Lasco, refers to "heylyghe oeffeninghe" (Q/A 76, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 134). A Lasco's own *Een corte ondersouckinge des gheloofs* (1553) also contains a reference to "heylyghe oeffeningen" (Q/A 28, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 134), and in his Emden Catechism (*Catechismus ofte Kinderleere tho nütte der Jöget in Ostfrieslandt*, 1554), like Heidelberg Catechism 65 and 66, the adjective "holy" modifies a series of nouns related to the Word and sacraments: "hilligen Godlicken Wordes," "hilligen Sacramenten," "hilligen Euangelions," "hillige Handeligen" (Q/A 51–54, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 125–126, 135).

Scholars are not of one mind on the theological orientation of a Lasco's view of the sacraments. Lang, *Heidelberger Catechismus*, XLVIII, maintained that "theologisch zeigt er sich dabei überall als gemässiger Calvinist. Zwar sucht er, wo irgend möglich auch den Zürichern gerecht zu werden; an den entscheidenden Punkten ist Calvin jedoch sein Meister. . . . Auch in der Sakramentslehre ist die calvinische Auffassung durchschlagend, so eifrig sich Lasky bemüht, wertvolle zwinglische Elemente damit zu verbinden, und so gewiss auch jetzt noch eine feine Grenzlinie zwischen ihm und Calvin besteht."

In a more recent study, however, Dirk Rodgers ("John a Lasco in England" [Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1991], 212) has concluded that while certain emphases in a Lasco's sacramental theology "allow [him] to be distinguished from Bullinger and, to a greater extent, Zwingli," in the last analysis "he leans more toward Zurich than toward Geneva." In any case, a Lasco's view of the sacraments lies somewhere between those of Geneva and Zurich.



impossible. At every juncture the sources from at least two theological traditions overlap.<sup>51</sup>

If there is nothing distinctively Melanchthonian in the first half of Heidelberg Catechism 66, there is also nothing uniquely Zwinglian in the second half: "This promise of the gospel is that because of Christ's one sacrifice finished on the cross, he will grant us by grace forgiveness of sins and eternal life." Sturm argued that the connection here and again in Heidelberg Catechism 67 between sacrament and Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is found in neither Melanchthon nor Calvin but reflects a distinctive Zurich tradition going back through Bullinger, Erastus, and a Lasco to Zwingli.<sup>52</sup> Rohls and Neuser made the same observation with respect to the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, maintaining that the Heidelberg Catechism, like the Zwinglian tradition, views the Lord's Supper as a sign not of the presence of Christ in the eucharist but of the past sacrifice of Christ in which the believer now shares (Heidelberg Catechism 75).<sup>53</sup>

Sturm's assertion that this emphasis is missing in both Melanchthon and Calvin is only partially correct, however, for at several points in the Genevan Catechism Calvin links both baptism and the Lord's Supper to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Calvin sees baptism, for example, as a symbol of spiritual washing (forgiveness of sins) and spiritual regeneration (newness of life)—the same two benefits, indeed, to which the sacraments are connected in Heidelberg Catechism 66. For Calvin, however, neither one of these benefits inheres in the baptismal water itself: the washing of the soul is rooted in "the blood of Christ, which was poured out . . .," and regeneration comes "from both the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>54</sup> In a striking sequence of questions and answers, he also makes the connection between Christ's sacrificial death and the Lord's Supper:

<sup>51</sup> To cite but one more example, Bavinck (*Heidelbergische Catechismus*, 523–524), Richards (*Heidelberg Catechism*, 90), and Hesse ("Zur Sakramentslehre," 473–474, 478, 484), all consider as "Calvinist" the accent in Heidelberg Catechism 66ff. on God, not the believer, as the primary actor in the sacraments. Rorem, however, cites several references to Bullinger's *Decades* (trans. Thomas Harding, 4 vols. [Cambridge, 1849–1852], 4:403 [5.9], 240 [5.6], 316f., 327 [5.7], 443 [5.9]) in support of the conclusion that "the primary activity in the Supper, for Bullinger, is not that of the congregation, . . . but that of God who . . . testifies to the redemption accomplished in Christ's body and blood" ("The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 76). This emphasis can also be found in Melanchthon (see, e.g., his *Examen ordinandorum*, in CR 23:39–40).

<sup>52</sup> Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 294. Sturm cites references to Zwingli's works in ZW 3:534 and 2:127–137.

<sup>53</sup> Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 185; Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 269–270.

<sup>54</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 327, 330, in *Theological Treatises*, 133, 134 (OS 2:134, 135).

Q. WHAT THEN DO WE HAVE IN THE SYMBOL OF BREAD?

A. The body of Christ, as it was once sacrificed for us to reconcile us to God, is now thus also given to us . . .

Q. WHAT IS THE SYMBOL OF WINE?

A. Christ, as he poured out his blood once for satisfaction for sins and as the price of our redemption, so now holds it forth for us to drink, that we may feel the benefit which ought to accrue to us from it.

Q. ACCORDING TO THOSE REPLIES OF YOURS, THE HOLY SUPPER OF OUR LORD REFERS US TO HIS DEATH, IN ORDER THAT WE MAY PARTAKE OF ITS VIRTUE.

A. Quite so: for then the one and perpetual sacrifice, which suffices for our salvation, was made. There remains nothing further, except to enjoy it.<sup>55</sup>

This sounds little different from Heidelberg Catechism 75's claim that the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper remind and assure believers that they share in the broken body and poured out blood of Christ's one sacrifice on the cross. The presence of this theme in Calvin, therefore, raises serious doubts about the purely Zwinglian provenance of this emphasis in the Heidelberg Catechism.

As we move from the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of sacraments to its separate treatment of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the picture remains much the same: those features that allegedly identify the Heidelberg Catechism's sacramental teaching as Calvinist or late-Zwinglian are in fact characteristic of more than one tradition. Four examples illustrate the point. First of all, as we noted above, there is some confusion in the secondary literature about the theological roots of the parallelism that we find in such questions as Heidelberg Catechism 73 and 79.

Q. WHY THEN DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT CALL BAPTISM THE LAVER OF REGENERATION AND THE WASHING AWAY OF SINS?

A. God . . . wants to teach us that *just as* bodily dirt is taken away by water, *so* our sins are taken away by the blood and Spirit of Christ. But more important, he wants to assure us . . . that we are *as really* washed spiritually from our sins *as* we are washed with physical water. (73)

Q. WHY THEN DOES CHRIST CALL THE BREAD HIS BODY AND THE CUP HIS BLOOD . . . ?

A. Christ . . . wishes to teach us that *just as* bread and wine sustain the temporal life, *so* his crucified body and shed blood are the true food and drink of our souls unto eternal life. But more important, he

<sup>55</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 347–349, in *Theological Treatises*, 136–137 (OS 2:139).

wants to assure us . . . that . . . we share in his true body and blood  
*as surely as* we receive these holy signs with the physical mouth. . . .  
 (79)

Berkhof regarded this parallelism between the sign in each sacrament and that which it signifies as the “typical Calvinist doctrine of the sacraments,” whereas for Gerrish and Rorem such “symbolic parallelism” (Gerrish) was more characteristic of Bullinger.<sup>56</sup> In point of fact, both claims are correct.

There are actually two ways in which the parallelism between sign and signified are used in Heidelberg Catechism 73 and 79, both of which can be found in Calvin and Bullinger alike.

The parallelism in the first sentences of Heidelberg Catechism 73 and 79 is related to the role of the sacrament as *sign*. The outer, physical washing–sustenance represents to us and thus helps us to understand more clearly the inner, spiritual washing–sustenance. As the Heidelberg Catechism says, the sacraments “teach” us by this analogy. This, however, is the same point made by both Calvin and Bullinger.

Q. WHAT SIMILARITY HAS WATER TO THESE THINGS, THAT IT REPRESENTS THEM?

A. Forgiveness of sins is a kind of washing, by which our souls are cleansed from all their stains, just as bodily defilements are washed away by water. (Calvin)<sup>57</sup>

In the same way that . . . people’s bodies are cleansed with water, God works in our souls with the blood of Christ by his Spirit. (Bullinger)<sup>58</sup>

Q. BUT WHY IS THE BODY SYMBOLIZED BY BREAD AND THE BLOOD BY WINE?

A. By this we are taught that the body of our Lord has the same virtue spiritually to nourish our souls as bread has in nourishing our bodies for the sustenance of this present life. As wine exhilarates the heart of men, refreshes their strength, and fortifies the whole body, so from the blood of our Lord the very same benefits are received by our souls. (Calvin)<sup>59</sup>

Now in the Lord’s Supper bread and wine represent the very body and blood of Christ. . . . As bread nourisheth and strengtheneth man, . . . so the body of Christ, eaten by faith, feedeth and satisfieth the soul of

<sup>56</sup> See n. 24 above.

<sup>57</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 325, in *Theological Treatises*, 133 (OS 2:133–134).

<sup>58</sup> “Quemadmodum enim . . . aqua hominum corpora mundantur: ita similia in animis nostris Deus sanguine Christi per spiritum suum operatur” (Bullinger, *Compendium*, 119r; Cf. also idem, *Decades*, 4:328f. [5.7], 364 [5.8]).

<sup>59</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 341, in *Theological Treatises*, 135–136 (OS 2:137).

man. . . . As wine is drink to the thirsty, . . . so the blood of our Lord Jesus, drunken by faith, doth quench the thirst of the burning conscience. . . . (Bullinger)<sup>60</sup>

The parallelism in the second sentences of Heidelberg Catechism 73 and 79 is related to the role of the sacrament as *seal*. The outer, physical washing/eating and drinking assures us of the reality of their inner, spiritual counterparts. As certainly as the former happens, so certainly the latter. Once again, however, the same approach can be found earlier in both Bullinger and Calvin:

All these things are sealed in baptism. For internally we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit. Externally, however, we receive the seal of these greatest of gifts in the water, by which these greatest of benefits are also represented. . . . And it is for that reason that we are baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. (Bullinger)<sup>61</sup>

And the godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there. For why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, except to assure you of a true participation in it? But if it is true that a visible sign is given us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us. (Calvin)<sup>62</sup>

Just as the parallelism between sign and signified in some of the Heidelberg Catechism's sacramental questions provides no clue to their literary origins or theological slant, neither do the several references to the washing with Christ's blood and Spirit in the Heidelberg Catechism's section on baptism or to the "breaking of bread" (*fractio panis*) in the section on the Lord's Supper. Sturm notes that the juxtaposition of the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit in Ursinus's theses on baptism in 1559 appears also and earlier in Calvin's Genevan Catechism (Q/A 327).<sup>63</sup> This combination then resurfaces in Ma 285–288, Mi 57–58, 61–62, and Heidelberg Catechism 69–73.

<sup>60</sup> *Decades*, 4:329 (5.7).

<sup>61</sup> "Obsignantur haec omnia baptismo. Nam intus regeneramur, purificamur, et renovamur a Deo per Spiritum Sanctum: foris autem accipimus obsignationem maximorum donorum in aqua, qua etiam maxima illa beneficia repraesentantur. . . . Ideoque baptizamus, id est, abluimur, aut adspargimur aqua visibili" ("The Second Helvetic Confession [*Confessio Helvetica posterior*]," in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 3 vols. [reprint, Grand Rapids, 1990], 3:290 [20.3]). This confession was published in 1566 after the Heidelberg Catechism but was actually composed in the early 1560s before the Heidelberg Catechism.

<sup>62</sup> *Inst.* 4.17.10, in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 edition), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1960), 2:1371 (OS 5:352).

<sup>63</sup> *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 150.



What Sturm fails to recognize, however, is that there is mention earlier of the same twofold essence of spiritual washing in both Melancthon and Bullinger.<sup>64</sup> Likewise with the *fractio panis*. According to Sturm, this sacramental action of breaking the bread to signify that the body of Christ was "broken for me . . . on the cross" (Heidelberg Catechism 75; cf. also Ma 297 and Mi 64) is a late Zwinglian element not found in the Genevan Catechism but introduced by Ursinus into Ma and Mi under the influence of Zurich.<sup>65</sup> However, while there is indeed evidence for this doctrine in the Zurich tradition as far back as Bullinger's *Warhafftige Bekanntnus* of 1545,<sup>66</sup> Sturm himself acknowledges that the two confessions by the Calvinist Theodore Beza in the late 1550s may also have influenced Ursinus in this regard.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, that Caspar Olevianus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, was in all likelihood the translator of Beza's smaller confession into German in 1562 provides another possible link to the appearance of the *fractio panis* in the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>68</sup> In any case, it is not strictly a late-Zwinglian idea.

Finally, the aspect of the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine of the Lord's Supper most often alleged to be a Calvinist trademark is the role of the Holy Spirit as the bond of the mystical union between Christ and the believer.<sup>69</sup> Heidelberg Catechism 76 and 79 read in part:

<sup>64</sup> Melancthon, *Examen ordinandorum*, in CR 23: LXV: "[In baptism God] weicht dich mit dieser Tauffe, zur bedeutung, das dir deine Sünde mit seinem Blut abgewaschen sind, Und das er dich mit dem Heiligen Geist, zu newer und ewiger Gerechtigkeit und seligkeit heiligen wil."

Bullinger, *CHP* 20.3, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:290: "Deus . . . purgat nos a peccatis gratuito, per sanguinem Filii sui. . . Nam intus regeneramur, purificamur, et renovamur a Deo per Spiritum Sanctum. . ." Idem, *Compendium*, 119r: "Quemadmodum . . . aqua hominum corpora mundantur: ita similia in animis nostris Deus sanguine Christi per spiritum suum operatur."

<sup>65</sup> *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 300, 306.

<sup>66</sup> Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 269.

<sup>67</sup> Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 300, quotes the following passage (IV,50) from Beza's larger confession (French ed., 1559; Latin ed., 1560): "Panis fractio nostris sensibus repraesentat Domini nostri passionem, qui fractus est doloribus et angustiis mortis. . ." The text can be found in E. F. K. Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirchen* (Leipzig, 1903), 424. Sturm notes (op. cit., 171) that Ursinus was well enough acquainted and impressed with Beza's larger confession to recommend it to friends.

On the influence of Beza's two confessions on the Heidelberg Catechism, see Walter Hollweg, "Die beiden Konfessionen Theodor von Bezas: Zwei bisher unbeachtete Quellen zum Heidelberger Katechismus," in *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Heidelberger Katechismus*, vol. 13 of *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche* (Neukirchen, 1961), 86–123.

<sup>68</sup> On the linkage between Olevianus, Beza's Small Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism, see Hollweg, "Zur Quellenfrage des Heidelberger Katechismus," in *Neue Untersuchungen*, vol. 28 of *Beiträge* (Neukirchen, 1968), 39–41.

<sup>69</sup> Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*, 116–117; Richards, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 90; Gustav A. Benrath, "Eigenart der Pfälzischen Reformation und die Vorgeschichte des Heidelberger Katechismus," *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* 7 (1963): 25; Berkhof, "Catechism as an Expression of Our Faith," 113; Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 125; Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 302, 304–305.

Q. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO EAT THE CRUCIFIED BODY OF CHRIST AND TO DRINK HIS POURED-OUT BLOOD?

A. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body. And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. . . . (76)

Q. WHY DOES CHRIST CALL THE BREAD HIS BODY AND THE CUP HIS BLOOD . . . ?

A. . . . He wants to assure us, by this visible sign and pledge, that we, through the Holy Spirit's work, share in His body and blood, as surely as we receive these signs with the physical mouth. . . . (79)

That this is a key theme in Calvin is indisputable, but to imply that it is a uniquely Calvinist doctrine is misleading. To be sure, it cannot be found in this context in Melancthon, who felt that discussion of the Spirit's efficacy in the eucharist could too easily be misconstrued in the Zwinglian sense of *limiting* Christ's presence in the supper to his Spirit. Nevertheless, Melancthon does emphasize the role of the Spirit in his treatment of the sacraments in general.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, references to the Spirit's binding of believers to Christ in the Lord's Supper appear in the *Consensus Tigurinus* (Zurich Consensus) between Bullinger and Calvin in 1549 and in Bullinger's subsequent writings. In the *Consensus Tigurinus* the two reformers profess that it is only as believers are ingrafted into Christ that they acquire and enjoy the blessings of salvation (III, V–VI, VIII).<sup>71</sup> All who come to the sacraments in faith, therefore, receive what the sacraments represent to the senses, namely, Christ and his benefits (VIII–IX). Since Christ's finite body is contained in heaven (XXI, XXV), however, one's spiritual communion with him at the Lord's Supper is achieved solely through the Holy Spirit: Christ feeds the soul through faith by virtue of his Spirit's dwelling within the believer (III, VI, VIII, XII, XIV, XXIII).<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Ralph W. Quere, "Christ's Efficacious Presence in the Lord's Supper: Directions in the Development of Melancthon's Theology after Augsburg," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (1977): 22–23, 25.

<sup>71</sup> References here are to paragraph number only. The Latin text of the Zurich Consensus can be found in CO 7:733–748. An English translation by Ian Bunting was published in the *Journal of Presbyterian History* 44 (1966): 45–61.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Bullinger, *Compendium*, 123v–124r: "Christi enim corpus in coelis est in gloria, non in his terris in corruptione. Spiritualiter autem corpus Christi comedendum, & sanguis eius bibendus est. Comeditur autem fide, sive per fidem. Nempe quod Dominus, qui verum habet corpus, & vere etiam passus est, Spiritu suo interne in cordibus hominum de coelo operatur, ac illis vitam & omnia quae suo sacro corpore seu passione sua adeptus est, confert."

Bullinger makes much the same point in the Second Helvetic Confession. The body of Christ is in heaven at the right hand of God. Therefore we must not fix our attention upon the sacramental bread but lift our hearts upwards. Like the sun, which is far away in the heavens yet present among us in its effects (*efficaciter*), Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, is absent from us in body but present among us spiritually through his life-giving activity (*spiritualiter per vivificam operationem*) in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>73</sup> As Rohls reminds us, for Bullinger this spiritual presence of Christ in the supper is not limited to the presence of his divine nature or, as the analogy of the sun suggests, to the *power* of his body. Rather it is the Holy Spirit who serves as the instrument by which Christ communicates his body and blood to the believing celebrant.<sup>74</sup> As Bullinger puts it elsewhere in the Second Helvetic Confession, believers receive the body and blood of Christ "not in a corporeal but in a spiritual mode, through the Holy Spirit" (*non corporali modo, sed spirituali, per Spiritum Sanctum*). These benefits are "communicated to us spiritually by the Spirit of God" (*spiritualiter nobis a Spiritu Dei communicantur*).<sup>75</sup> When the Heidelberg Catechism states, therefore, that in the Lord's Supper Christ testifies that "we, through the Holy Spirit's work, share in his body and blood," it does so in the spirit of Calvin but not in a manner unique to Calvin. One could just as appropriately label it Bullingerian.

In sum, the major themes in Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 that past scholarship has alleged to be either Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian—the definition of the sacraments, the connection between the sacraments and Christ's sacrificial death, the parallelism between sign and signified, baptism as washing with Christ's blood and Spirit, the *fractio panis*, and the Holy

<sup>73</sup> CHP 21.10, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:294.

<sup>74</sup> *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 277. Cf. also Bullinger, Catechesis Q/A 280, in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Catechismus"], 155: "Qui passus est pro nobis, et resurrexit a mortuis, et ascendit in coelum sedetque ad dextram Patris atque nos redemit, seipsum nobis cibum vivificum communicat per Spiritum suum sanctum: nos autem edimus et bibimus, id est recipimus ipsum per fidem, ut ipse in nobis vivat et nos vivamus in ipso."

<sup>75</sup> CHP 21.5, 6 in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:292–293. Cf. also the statement by the Heidelberg Bullingerian Thomas Erastus in his treatise *Grundtlicher Bericht* (Heidelberg, 1562): "So ist denn diess der rechte, klare, gegründete Verstand der Worte des hl. Apostels: das Brod . . . ist das nicht ein gewisses Wahrzeichen, Pfand, oder Sakrament, dadurch alle Gläubigen in ihrem Herzen kräftiglich überzeugt werden, dass sie in der Gemeinschaft oder Gesellschaft des Leibes Christi sind: das ist, dass sie durch die verborgene, allmächtige, unerforschliche Kraft Gottes, des hl. Geistes, Christo einverleibet, rechtschaffene, lebendige Glieder seines Leibes geworden . . . ?" (cited in Sudhoff, C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus, 85).

Spirit as the bond of union between Christ and the believer in the Lord's Supper—all turn out to be present in at least one, and usually both, of the other traditions as well. The use of these labels is not so much incorrect as incomplete, for none of the doctrinal material that we have examined can be identified exclusively with one branch of Protestantism.



### III

## Critical Silence

If all of these features of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 that in the past have been labelled Calvinist, Philippist, or late-Zwinglian are in fact part of a shared tradition, does that common ground suggest that there were no differences at all in sacramental teaching among these three Protestant families or that the Heidelberg Catechism does not address differences that did exist? The evidence points to the latter. In spite of the fact that Calvin, for example, could repeatedly approve Melanchthon's altered version of the Augsburg Confession and at the same time subscribe to the *Consensus Tigurinus* with Bullinger,<sup>76</sup> there remained disputed points of sacramental doctrine among the three reformers and their followers, none of which surfaces in the Heidelberg Catechism. To put it another way, the Heidelberg Catechism appears to avoid issues and language related to the sacraments that could have identified it too closely with one or two parties and given offense to the other(s).

Some of these issues have already been identified by scholars in the past. It has been noted, for example, that according to the major sources of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the reasons for the divine institution of the sacraments was "so that those who use them might, on their part, bind themselves to persevere in true faith and piety toward God" (Ma 275; cf. also 277), or "obligate themselves to faith and a holy life" (Mi 54; cf. also 57, 64). However, as closely as Heidelberg Catechism 66, 69, and 75 follow the structure and wording of their counterparts in Ma and Mi, they contain no such reference to the sacraments as signs of human obligation. At first this may seem odd since Melanchthon, Calvin, and Bullinger had all included such

<sup>76</sup> John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London, 1954; reprint, 1977), 197ff.

language in their own definitions of sacraments.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the early Zwinglian tradition had *stressed* this meaning of the sacraments, and the Heidelberg Catechism may have excluded the language of human responsibility to keep from sounding too Zwinglian to the Calvinists and Philipppists in the Palatinate and to the Lutheran princes in the surrounding territories.<sup>78</sup>

The language of covenant may have suffered the same fate. Covenant (*foedus*, *Bund*) is a dominant theme in Ma, including the section on sacraments (cf. 274, 276–277, 279, 284, 288, 293–296, 306), but it appears in only three questions in Mi (55, 63, 71) and only two in the Heidelberg Catechism (74, 82). This virtual disappearance of the covenant theme in the latter two documents may be accounted for by the different purposes for which they were written. Ma was probably designed originally for specialized use as a classroom text in theology, whereas Mi was a preparatory document for a more widely-used and more “ecumenical” catechism (Heidelberg Catechism). Whether the references in Ma to sacraments as *signa foederis* sounded too Zwinglian or the “covenant of creation” in Ma 10 was just too novel an idea, the Reformed doctrine of covenant very likely posed a stumbling block to Lutherans on both sides of the Palatinate border and was intentionally omitted in the drafting of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>79</sup>

It was not just Lutheran toes, however, on which the Heidelberg Catechism sought not to tread. As far back as the Apology to the Augsburg Confession in 1530, Melancthon had declared that Christ is “truly and substan-

<sup>77</sup> Melancthon, *Loci theologici* [1543 ed.], CR 21, 848: “Postremo admonet ritus de multis officiis: Primum de gratiarum actione praestanda Deo, postea de mutua benevolentia membrorum Ecclesiae.”

Calvin, *Inst.* 4.14.1, in *Calvin: Institutes*, 2:1277 (OS 5:259): “First, we must consider what a sacrament is. It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us . . . and we in turn attest our piety toward him. . . .”

Bullinger, *Compendium*, 112v: “Postremo sacramenta instituta sunt, ut nos officii nostri admo-  
neant, quo in unitate corporis Christi, in vera pietate & fraterno amore vitam peragamus. . . .”

<sup>78</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergische Catechismus* [“Inleiding”], 105–107; Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, XCIII; Hesse, “Zur Sakramentslehre des Heidelberger Katechismus,” 475–476; Walter Kreck, “Die Abendmahlslehre in den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften,” in *Die Abendmahlslehre in den reformatorischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Munich, 1955), 43. Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt, 1962), 302, disagrees with Hesse’s conclusion that Heidelberg Catechism 66’s silence on the sacraments as *Pflichtzeichen* represents an accommodation to the Lutherans—for two reasons: (1) there is no mention of *Pflichtzeichen* in Calvin’s Genevan Catechism either, and (2) the rest of Heidelberg Catechism 66 stands in opposition to Lutheran teaching, since the sacraments are portrayed as only pointing to, not actually distributing, that which they signify. As we saw above, however, Calvin does refer to the sacraments as *Pflichtzeichen* in the *Institutes*. We shall evaluate the second of Bizer’s two reasons below.

<sup>79</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergische Catechismus* [“Inleiding”], 74, 87; Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, LXXVIII–LXXIX.

tially [*substantialiter*] present" in the Lord's Supper,<sup>80</sup> and Calvin had asserted in the Genevan Catechism (1545) that believers are made partakers of the *substantia* of Christ as they partake of the elements.<sup>81</sup> Both of these notions appeared again in Ursinus: in his 1559 *Theses* he states that Christ is "truly and substantially present" (*vere et substantialiter adest*) to believers in the Lord's Supper,<sup>82</sup> and in Ma 300 we read that the "eating of Christ" is not just a sharing in his merits and the gifts of the Holy Spirit but also a communication of the person and *substantia* of Christ himself.<sup>83</sup> Bullinger, however, strongly opposed the use of the word "substance" to describe the presence and communication of the body of Christ at the Lord's Supper,<sup>84</sup> and remarkably all such "substance" language is also absent in the treatment of the Lord's Supper in both Mi and the Heidelberg Catechism. Is this to be explained by the fact that Mi and the Heidelberg Catechism are simply not as theologically sophisticated as Ma (Sturm)? Is it perhaps but one reflection of a more general Zurich-oriented view of the Lord's Supper in the Heidelberg Catechism (Gooszen, Neuser)?<sup>85</sup> Or is this yet another instance of intentional silence in a consensus document that sought to avoid unnecessary offense to one or more parties in the discussion?

The answer may lie in the way the Heidelberg Catechism deals with perhaps the most critical question in sixteenth-century sacramental theology: how the sacraments function as means of grace, or more precisely, how the material signs of a sacrament are related to the spiritual blessings they signify. Of particular relevance to the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism are the differences between Calvin and Bullinger on this issue. Calvin defended a position that has been termed "symbolic instrumentalism," which holds that the signs or elements of a sacrament are the instruments through which (*per*) or by which God's Spirit conveys the spiritual reality that they symbolize.<sup>86</sup> Sacramental signs can be distinguished from that which they signify, but they

<sup>80</sup> See Quere, "Christ's Efficacious Presence," 31, n. 41.

<sup>81</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 353, in *Theological Treatises*, 137 (OS 2:140).

<sup>82</sup> *Theses*, in *Tractationum*, 359.

<sup>83</sup> Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, 195.

<sup>84</sup> Neuser, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 311, n. 12, notes, e.g., that in 1557 Bullinger strongly rejected such terminology when Beza, with Calvin's approval, employed it in a proposed formula of unity. Neuser also points out that in CHP 21.4 (Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 3:292) Bullinger denies that we eat the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper *essentialiter*.

<sup>85</sup> Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 303–304; Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["In-leiding"], 87–88; Neuser, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 311.

<sup>86</sup> Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 128. For a summary of Calvin's view of the relationship between sign and signified, see also Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* (Tyler, TX, 1953, 1982), 159ff.; Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 218–220; and Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 73–75.



cannot be separated. The sign is joined with the signified in such a way that the latter is offered to and received by the believer simultaneously with the former.<sup>87</sup> Sacraments are, in the strictest sense of the term, "means of grace."

Bullinger, on the other hand, took a position that may be called "symbolic parallelism." He was concerned that Calvin's use of the noun *instrumentum*, the verb *exhibere*, and the preposition *per* ascribes more efficacy to the sacramental signs than to the Holy Spirit. The sacraments are not "instruments" that "confer" grace "through" the signs. Rather, the elements provide only a symbolic parallel or visual analogy in which God testifies to the inner working of his grace *independently* of the signs. The Spirit may work simultaneously with the signs, as in the case of the Lord's Supper, but the signs remain separate from the blessings to which they point. They only resemble grace; they do not confer it.<sup>88</sup>

As Rorem has recently shown, these differences between Calvin and Bullinger endured beyond their compromise in the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, both in the two men themselves and in the confessional traditions that they inspired. With respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Rorem concludes:

In any case, the two views of the Lord's Supper have managed to live side by side within the Reformed tradition for centuries. Does a given Reformed statement of faith consider the Lord's Supper as a testimony, an analogy, a parallel, even a simultaneous parallel to the internal workings of God's grace in granting communion with Christ? If so, the actual ancestor may be Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich. Or does it explicitly identify the Supper as the very instrument or means through which God offers and confers the grace of full communion with Christ's body? The lineage would then go back to John Calvin (and to Martin Bucer). . . .<sup>89</sup>

Of particular interest here, of course, is the lineage of the Heidelberg Catechism on this point of doctrine. Is the catechism Calvinist or Bullingerian in its view of the relation between the sign and the signified? In the past, this question has been answered both ways. Neuser, for example, argued that the reference in Heidelberg Catechism 65 to the Spirit's confirmation of one's

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Calvin's statement about baptism in Genevan Catechism Q/A 328 (OS 2:134): "Sic figura sentio, ut simul annexa sit veritas. Neque enim, sua nobis dona pollicendo, nos Deus frustratur. Proinde et peccatorum veniam, et vitae novitatem offerri nobis in baptismo, et recipi a nobis certum est."

<sup>88</sup> Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 128; Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 217–218; and Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 75–78.

<sup>89</sup> Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 90.

faith through the use of the sacraments<sup>90</sup> reflects Calvin's view that the sacraments help a weak faith to grow (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 66: "make us understand . . . better") rather than Zwingli's position that sacraments merely confirm those blessings that faith already possesses. In other words, for the Heidelberg Catechism the Spirit does not simply reinforce something that the believer already has, but actually gives something *through* the sacraments. Like Calvin the Heidelberg Catechism treats the sacraments as *Heilmittel*, means by which the blessings of salvation are communicated to the believer.<sup>91</sup>

Gerrish and Rohls maintained, however, that the Heidelberg Catechism stops short of a full Calvinistic depiction of the sacraments as means of grace. According to Gerrish, the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism are signs and pledges of God's grace, but they do not themselves convey the grace they signify. They only remind and assure us that we have it independently of the sacraments.<sup>92</sup> Rohls points out that in Heidelberg Catechism 73 baptism is described as a divine sign and pledge of grace *already* given.<sup>93</sup> And the Lord's Supper in the Heidelberg Catechism is only a means of *assurance* that we spiritually feed on Christ, not a means by which that feeding itself takes place.<sup>94</sup> Both Gerrish and Rohls conclude that the Heidelberg Catechism is much closer to Bullinger here than to Calvin.

At first glance, it would seem that Gerrish and Rohls have the better of this argument. Although it is true that Calvin, like Heidelberg Catechism 65, regards the sacraments as means by which the Spirit strengthens weak faith,<sup>95</sup> this emphasis is not unique to him; Bullinger, and for that matter, Melanch-

<sup>90</sup> Heidelberg Catechism 65:

Q. SINCE IT IS BY FAITH ALONE THAT WE SHARE IN CHRIST AND ALL HIS BENEFITS,  
WHERE DOES THAT FAITH COME FROM?

A. The Holy Spirit works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.

<sup>91</sup> "Die Sakramente sind Heilmittel. Dem Einwand, 'bestätigen' bedeute, dem Glauben werde nur gegeben, was er schon besitze, tritt Frage 66 entgegen: Sakramente sind eingesetzt, damit Gott 'durch den Gebrauch derselben die Verheissung des Evangeliums desto besser zu verstehen gebe und versiegle.' Die Sakramente besitzen Gabecharakter" (Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 185–186). This represents a change in Neuser's position from his earlier article, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 311, where he characterizes Heidelberg Catechism 66, as "neuzwinglianisch."

<sup>92</sup> Gerrish, "Sign and Reality," 126.

<sup>93</sup> "Doch gerade die vom Heidelberger Katechismus getroffene Zuordnung von äusserem und innerem Waschen lässt den Eindruck aufkommen, als handle es sich bei der äusseren Waschung zwar nicht um das *Bekenntniszeichen*, wohl aber um das Pfand einer bereits *zuteilgewordenen* Gnade. Hat doch Christus die Taufe eingesetzt, um uns zu versichern, 'dass wir so wahrhaftig von unseren Sünden geistlich gewaschen *sind*, als wir mit dem leiblichen Wasser gewaschen werden' (Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 251).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 269–270.

<sup>95</sup> Genevan Catechism Q/A 319, 320 (OS 2:132–133); *Inst.* 14.4.1.

thon make the very same point.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Heidelberg Catechism 65 does not teach that the sacraments possess what Neuser calls a *Gabecharakter*, that is, that believers are actually *given* something *through* the signs.<sup>97</sup> It does say, of course, that the Spirit confirms our faith through our use of the sacraments, but that does not necessarily mean that they are instruments through which the spiritual benefits signified by the elements are conveyed. Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism drafting committee never employed the terms “means” and “instruments” that were available to it in parallel statements in Ma 266 and 267 (*instrumentum*) and in Mi 53 (*mediis et instrumentis*)—perhaps in an attempt to prevent the very reading of this question that some have since given it.

The same is true of the Heidelberg Catechism’s separate treatments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. According to Heidelberg Catechism 69, baptism reminds and assures us that “as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and Spirit wash away my soul’s impurity,” but nowhere in the Heidelberg Catechism is it stated, as it is, for example, in Calvin’s Genevan Catechism, that “reality is attached to [the water]” in such a way that “both pardon for sins and newness of life are certainly offered to us and received by us in baptism.”<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, the Lord’s Supper reminds and assures us that “as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, . . . so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood” (Heidelberg Catechism 75). But nowhere does the Heidelberg Catechism teach, as Calvin does in his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper*, that the terms body and blood are attributed to the bread and wine “because they are as instruments by which our Lord Jesus Christ distributes them to us.”<sup>99</sup> One might say that the Heidelberg Catechism portrays the sacraments as means of confirmation or means of assurance, but not, in the strict Calvinist sense of the term, as means of grace, means by or through which the Spirit communicates to the believer the divine benefits represented in the external signs and seals.<sup>100</sup>

Although the Heidelberg Catechism does not echo Calvin in its treat-

<sup>96</sup> Bullinger, *CHP* 19.1, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:285: “Sunt autem sacramenta . . . quibus . . . fidem nostram, Spiritu Dei in cordibus nostris operante, roborat et auget.” Melancthon, *CR* 21:210: “Adeo non iustificant signa, sed erat Ezechiae, item Gedeonis fides huiusmodi signis sublevanda, erigenda, et confirmanda, ita nostra imbecilitas signis erigitur.”

<sup>97</sup> See n. 91 above.

<sup>98</sup> See n. 87 above.

<sup>99</sup> “. . . pource que ce sont comme instrumens par lesquelz le Seigneur Iesus nous les distribue” (*Theological Treatises*, 147 [OS 1:508]).

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 270–271.



ment of the relationship between sign and signified, it cannot be characterized as distinctively Bullingerian either, as Gerrish and Rohls have maintained. To be sure, the Heidelberg Catechism, like Bullinger, places sign and signified together in a kind of “symbolic parallelism,” but as we have seen earlier, so did Calvin. Where Calvin and Bullinger parted ways was not on whether the sign and signified are parallel but on whether they are *merely* parallel. Are sacramental signs and actions only visual analogies to the grace that the Holy Spirit bestows apart from them (Bullinger), or are they more than analogies, namely, the very means or instruments through which that grace is communicated to believers (Calvin)? That is a question the Heidelberg Catechism does not address. It neither affirms nor denies one position or the other. The catechism extends as far as the two reformers might agree, but no further.

The only reference to the sign–signified relation that might be construed as distinctively Zwinglian or late-Zwinglian is, as Rohls has noted, a section of the answer in Heidelberg Catechism 73:

Q. WHY THEN DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT CALL BAPTISM THE WASHING OF REBIRTH AND THE WASHING AWAY OF SINS?

A. God . . . wishes to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are washed [*gewaschen sind*] spiritually from our sins as surely as we are washed [*gewaschen werden*] with the material water.

English translations of this answer obscure a grammatical subtlety in the German text that has a bearing on the issue before us. Both occurrences of the verb *waschen* are in the passive voice, but they are formed with different auxiliary verbs. In the first case, the auxiliary verb *sein* indicates that *gewaschen sind* is an “apparent passive,” which expresses a state or condition resulting from a previous action. In the second, however, the auxiliary *werden* forms part of a regular passive, which expresses a process or action that is taking place at the time.<sup>101</sup> The English translation, therefore, could better read, “God . . . wishes to assure us . . . that we are *already* washed spiritually from our sins as surely as we are *being* washed with the material water.” In other words, water baptism is an assurance of a spiritual baptism that has previously taken place; it signifies a grace already given.<sup>102</sup>

This temporal separation of sign and signified has a definite Zwinglian

<sup>101</sup> George A. C. Scherer and Hans-Heinrich Wängler, *Contemporary German* (New York, 1966), 453. The difference can be illustrated with the following pair of sentences:

Regular Passive: Das Geschäft wird geschlossen. (The store is being closed.)

Apparent Passive: Das Geschäft ist geschlossen. (The store is closed.)

<sup>102</sup> See n. 93 above.

ring to it<sup>103</sup> and is strongly implied also in Bullinger's treatment of baptism.<sup>104</sup> However, the Heidelberg Catechism does not necessarily betray a debt to Zurich here, for a similar approach to baptism can be found earlier in Ursinus, Melanchthon, and even Calvin. In his discussion of the sacraments in his 1559 *Theses*, for example, Ursinus had emphasized that it is the function of sacraments not to confer (*conferre*) grace and its gifts but to seal in us the grace and gifts already conferred (*collata*). It is only after the sacramental *res* has been received, whether before or during the ceremony, that the sacrament becomes a testimony to that bestowal of grace.<sup>105</sup> Ursinus then reiterates this point in the next section on baptism.<sup>106</sup> That he should describe baptism in this way is understandable when we recall that he had composed his *Theses* of 1559 in defense of Melanchthon's view of the sacraments and that Melanchthon himself had referred to baptism in this way. In a relatively brief treatment of baptism in his 1521 *Loci*, for example, Melanchthon characterizes post-Pentecost baptism, in contrast with the baptism of John, as a sign of grace "already bestowed" (*iam donatae*), a pledge and seal of grace "already conferred" (*iam collatae*), a testimony of "bestowed grace" (*donatae gratiae*), and an assurance of grace "already bestowed" (*iam collatam*).<sup>107</sup>

Calvin, too, was willing to grant in the *Consensus Tigurinus* with Bullinger that the reality signified in the sacrament can also be received by the faithful outside of the sacrament. According to the *Consensus* (XIX), the Apostle Paul had already been granted remission of sins and Cornelius had already received the Holy Spirit *before* baptism. Water baptism was still a washing away of sins for Paul and a laver of regeneration for Cornelius but only insofar as it confirmed and increased the faith by which these benefits were then appropriated in greater measure.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Zwingli, *Fidei Ratio* (1530), in Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, 86: "Ex quibus hoc colligitur . . . sacramenta dari in Testimonium publicum eius gratiae, quae cuique privato prius adest."

<sup>104</sup> According to Ernst Koch, *Die Theologie der Confessio Helvetica Posterior*, vol. 27 of *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche*, eds. H. Erhart et al. (Neukirchen, 1968), 286, "... dass die Taufe in den Bund, die Familie und das Erbe der Kinder Gottes initiiert und aufnimmt, dass sie dem Täufling den Namen eines filius Dei beilegt, dass sie von den Sünden-flecken reinigt und die Gnade Gottes zu einem neuen Leben verleiht [CHP 20], heist, dass sie alle diese Tatbestände als bereits geschehen bezeichnet." See also *ibid.*, 288.

<sup>105</sup> "Sacramentorum igitur proprium non est conferre gratiam & eius dona, sed collata nobis obsignare, id est, postquam res fide acceptae sunt vel accipiuntur, in sacramento accedit exhibitionis testimonium" (*Theses*, in *Tractationum*, 350).

<sup>106</sup> "In omni autem legitimo usu baptismi, id est, cum baptizatur conversus ritu et fine instituto, necesse est gratiam et donum per gratiam vel iam esse donatam vel certe simul donare. Non enim ideo efficitur filii Dei, quia baptizatur, sed ideo baptizandi sumus, quia sumus filii Dei et ut nos esse filios reddamur certiores" (*ibid.*, 357).

<sup>107</sup> CR 21:213–215.

<sup>108</sup> See n. 71 above. Cf. also Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 186.



Especially worthy of note here is that this common approach to baptism as a sign and seal of grace already conferred is not tied to a uniform understanding of the relationship between the sign and signified in the sacrament itself. In his commentary on Acts in 1552, three years after the *Consensus Tigurinus*, Calvin could still describe the remission of sins as being “annexed” (*annectitur*) to baptism (a verb that would likely have made Bullinger cringe), even though this benefit is only being granted in greater measure to a faith that is strengthened in baptism.<sup>109</sup>

Ursinus, meanwhile, took a position between that of Calvin and Bullinger. In the case of those who come to baptism already regenerated, he, like Calvin, speaks (in his *Theses*) of a certain concurrence of sign and signified, as the gifts to which water baptism testifies are increased in the believer.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, however, Ursinus is more cautious than Calvin when it comes to describing the conferral of grace *through* the sacraments. The preposition *per* may be used in this context but only if it is understood that the benefits of the sacrament are communicated simultaneously with the sign or in greater abundance than before.<sup>111</sup> Like his mentor Melanchthon before him, Ursinus believes that the expression “with the sacraments” or “in the sacraments” (that is, in the use of the sacraments) is more precise.<sup>112</sup>

In short, followers of Calvin, Bullinger, and Melanchthon could all subscribe to Heidelberg Catechism 73’s formulation of the relationship between inner and outer baptism without having to commit also to a uniform understanding of the union between sign and signified. In Heidelberg Catechism 73 the sign can testify to a grace already given regardless of whether that sign

<sup>109</sup> “Fidei autem confirmandae et augendae baptismus adminiculum est, illi, tanquam inferiori medio, remissio peccatorum, quae fidei est effectus, annectitur” (CO 48:53).

<sup>110</sup> “Eos qui iam sunt recepti a Deo & renati, baptizari nihilo minus necesse est, & propter mandatum Dei, & quia nos de bonis acceptis baptismus confirmat: eius acceptionis apud alios testimonium est: & per eum ipsa in nobis dona augentur. . . . Etsi autem ad omnem legitimum baptismi usum concurrat rerum signatarum exhibitio: nulla tamen aquae & sanguinis vel Spiritus Christi mutatio aut coniunctio physica fingenda est” (*Theses*, in *Tractationum*, 357).

<sup>111</sup> “Cum autem res conferri per sacramenta dicuntur, simul eas, aut etiam abundantius communicari significatur” (ibid., 350).

<sup>112</sup> Melanchthon, “Iudicium de Zwinglii doctrina” (1530), CR 2:223: “Nos docemus, quod corpus Christ vere et realiter adsit cum pane, vel in pane.” Quere, “Christ’s Efficacious Presence,” 33–34, notes that even though Melanchthon used the prepositions “with” and “in” up through his negotiations with Bucer in August 1530, the ongoing Reformed objection to the formula *in pane* led him to employ only *cum pane* in subsequent writings.

Ursinus, *Theses*, in *Tractationum*, 349: “Dicuntur quandoque etiam per sacramenta conferri a Deo bona promissa: quod sit nequaquam vi aliqua sacramentis divinitatus infusa: sed primum ratione temporis, quia simul utraque accipiunt credentes. Et magis proprie dicitur, CUM vel IN sacramentis seu usu sacramentorum.”

is considered only an analogy or also an instrument of that grace. In this respect, Heidelberg Catechism 73 is typical of the rest of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82: it sets forth those points of sacramental doctrine on which the three moderate traditions in Heidelberg converged. On those points where they diverged, the catechism remains silent.

## IV

### Historical Context

The focus of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 on areas of agreement among Philippists, Calvinists, and late-Zwinglians and the circumvention of those issues that divided them hardly seem coincidental when one examines the historical context in which the Heidelberg Catechism was composed. Frederick III (1515–1576), who commissioned the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1562, had been born and raised a Roman Catholic but had adopted the Lutheran faith of his wife Maria during the early years of their marriage. Even before becoming elector of the Palatinate, however, he found himself moving away from the strict Lutheranism of his wife and toward the more moderate expression of Lutheranism represented by Philip Melanchthon. As governor of both the Upper Palatinate and Simmern, Frederick became involved in several attempts to unify the Protestant territories in the German Empire and was one of the signatories to the Frankfurt Recess, a statement of Protestant confessional unity drawn up by Melanchthon in 1558. By the time he acceded to the Palatinate electorate in 1559, therefore, Frederick III had already exhibited a “desire to avoid theological labels and . . . [was] satisfied with Scriptural simplicity as the basis for unity in the evangelical faith.”<sup>113</sup> Such an ecumenical spirit would almost immediately be put to the test.

When Frederick III arrived in Heidelberg in 1559, most of the major Protestant parties of the day already had a foothold in the city—strict Lutherans, Melanchthonian Lutherans (Philippists), Zwinglians (better termed late-Zwinglians or Bullingerians), and Calvinists. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Frederick’s predecessor, Otto Henry, had invited men from various Protestant persuasions to fill political and ecclesiastical posts in the Palatinate

<sup>113</sup> Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 78.

throughout his reign from 1556 to 1559.<sup>114</sup> Frederick continued this practice in the years before the Heidelberg Catechism appeared, but grew increasingly disenchanted with the strict-Lutheran leadership he had inherited.

An especially sharp thorn in his side was the strict-Lutheran Tilemann Hesshus, whom Otto Henry had appointed general superintendent of the Palatinate churches, dean of the theological faculty, and minister of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Heidelberg. In an ongoing dispute with the Calvinist William Klebitz about the Lord's Supper, Hesshus vociferously defended a doctrine of the oral manducation of the body of Christ in the sacrament and attacked anything less as Zwinglian. To restore the peace, Frederick finally dismissed both men from Heidelberg, but his disillusionment with Hesshus's brand of Lutheranism had deepened.<sup>115</sup> Despite pressure from his strict-Lutheran sons-in-law and their theologians, he continued to remove Lutheran officials from their posts and to appoint more moderate Philippists, Zurichers, and Calvinists in their stead.<sup>116</sup>

The controversy about the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper was not limited to the Palatinate. It lay at the heart of a growing debate in the Lutheran territories in the empire about which edition of the Augsburg Confession was to be considered authentic. The strict Lutherans preferred the "unaltered" Latin text of 1531 (*Invariata*), in which Article 10 on the Lord's Supper states that "the body and blood of Christ are truly present [the German text adds: under the form of bread and wine] and communicated [*distribuantur*] to those who eat in the Lord's Supper." This position was further developed in Brenz's Stuttgart Confession of 1559, which outlined the doctrines of oral manducation, ubiquity of Christ's human nature, and partaking of Christ's body and blood by unbelievers that would characterize the strict-Lutheran position in the decades to come. The Philippist Lutherans (and even Calvin), however, endorsed the 1540 "altered" text of the Augsburg Confession (*Variata*), which Melancthon had changed to read: "*with the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ are truly presented [exhibeantur] to those who eat in the Lord's Supper.*"<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 103–104, is uncomfortable with Ruth Wesel-Roth's suggestion (Thomas Erastus [Lahr, 1954], 17) that by attracting men from different Protestant factions to the University of Heidelberg, Otto Henry hoped to make the university a nucleus of Protestant unity. Visser himself offers the hypothesis that "Otto-Henry, while genuinely interested in theological reform, was—as his additions to the [Heidelberg] castle show—somewhat of a Renaissance prince and, in his search for professors, seems to have been more interested in reputation than in a specific program."

<sup>115</sup> For an overview of the Hesshus-Klebitz controversy, see Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 84–92.

<sup>116</sup> Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 110.

<sup>117</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:13.



For someone like Frederick III, whether the Augsburg Confession taught that Christ was received under the form of bread and wine or only with the elements was more than a matter of theological interest. Because the Peace of Augsburg (1555) excluded Calvinists and Zwinglians from its provisions, endorsement of Melancthon's Calvinist-sounding version of the confession could lead to the loss of his electoral privileges and even of his territory.<sup>118</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the question of the authentic text of the confession became a major item on the agenda of a convention of princes held in Naumburg in 1561. The Protestant leaders were hoping to patch up their differences in the face of increasing opposition to their cause by the German emperor and by a resurgent Roman Catholicism at the Council of Trent. They worked out a compromise whereby the delegates would sign the unaltered text but recognize in a preface that the altered text was a legitimate interpretation of the the confession. The compromise survived only a few months, however, before it was decisively rejected at another convention by John Frederick of Saxony, Frederick III's son-in-law, and a coterie of strict-Lutheran theologians.<sup>119</sup> Once again, the supporters of the altered version found themselves in a delicate religious and political position.

When Frederick III commissioned the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1562, therefore, his religious predilections coincided neatly with the theological and political needs of his territory. As we have seen, from the beginning of his political life Frederick had manifested an irenic spirit, eschewing theological labels and seeking to ground his doctrine in the simple teachings of Scripture. This became his approach in his early years in Heidelberg also as he began to sense the need for a statement of confessional unity among the three moderate Protestant factions that had come to dominate the city's religious landscape and to support his reforms. For the sake of both Protestant unity in the empire and his own political survival, however, he had to make sure that a new confession did not stray beyond the bounds of the Augsburg Confession, in its altered version at least, or provide his opponents with grounds to accuse him of Zwinglianism or Calvinism. From Frederick's perspective, what better way to exhibit a tolerant spirit, achieve doctrinal unity, and blunt his opponents' attacks than with a confessional statement such as the Heidelberg Catechism? After all, the Heidelberg Catechism deftly sidestepped divisive points and emphasized instead the common ground among the Melancthonians, late-Zwinglians, and Calvinists in the Palatinate, especially on the explosive issue of the Sacraments. What better way to quell strife than

<sup>118</sup> Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 101.

<sup>119</sup> Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 102–110.

with a catechism that rejected the eucharistic position of the Augsburg *Invariata* but never referred to the strict Lutherans by name, never raised the controversial topics of the sacraments as covenant signs or *Pflichtzeichen*, never took a distinctively Calvinist or late-Zwinglian stance on the sacraments, and above all stood mute on the issue of the precise relation of sign and signified?

That Frederick wished to focus on common ground and avoid theological labels in the Heidelberg Catechism is substantiated by the way he had the catechism prepared. The Heidelberg Catechism was first of all a committee project, the work of a team of men who represented the theological diversity of the Palatinate itself. Among the "chief theologians, superintendents, and church officers" who comprised the committee, there were at least one late-Zwinglian (Erastus), one Philippist (Diller), and several Calvinists (Tremellius, Olevianus, Zuleger, et al.).<sup>120</sup> Although, as Olevianus later reported to Calvin, it was "difficult . . . to reconcile many heads and bring them together,"<sup>121</sup> their hard work would help to ensure the unity of the elector's reformation and to prevent identification of the document with any one individual or theological party.<sup>122</sup>

In the course of their work, the drafting committee consulted and drew upon a multiplicity of other catechisms from the theological traditions represented on the team. The primary *Vorlagen* were, of course, Ursinus's Smaller Catechism (*Catechesis minor*, 1562), on which at least ninety of the 129 questions and answers in the Heidelberg Catechism were based, and, to a lesser extent, his Larger Catechism (*Summa Theologiae* or *Catechesis maior*, 1561 or 1562).<sup>123</sup> But there were also apparent literary links to earlier catechisms by Luther, Melancthon, Brenz, Bullinger, Jud, a Lasco, Calvin, and Beza.<sup>124</sup> According to Klooster, Brenz's comparison of his own writing of catechisms to a honeybee flitting from flower to flower to gather nectar is even more apt in the case of the team that produced the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>125</sup> This does

<sup>120</sup> Klooster, "The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Pittsburgh Theological Monographs (New Series)*, vol. 18, *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate, 1559–1583*, ed. Derk Visser (Allison Park, PA, 1986), 78–80; idem, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 110–113.

<sup>121</sup> CO 19:685, translated in Klooster, "Calvin's Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies*, vol. 22, *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO, 1994), 319.

<sup>122</sup> Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 116–117.

<sup>123</sup> See Neuser, "Erwählungslehre in the Heidelberger Katechismus," 311, and Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 241–243, 246–248.

<sup>124</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleideing"], 31–61; Lang, *Heidelberger Katechismus*, III–CIV; and Bard Thompson, "The Palatinate Church Order of 1563," *Church History* 23/4 (1954): 339–354.

<sup>125</sup> Klooster, "The Priority of Ursinus," 80.



not mean, however, that the end product was simply an assortment of fragments from other sources. As Klooster puts it, the Heidelberg Catechism was more like “an original tapestry marvelously woven” than a “patchwork quilt.”<sup>126</sup> The threads of its sources are easily lost in the weave and design of the document, and the task of fully unraveling them is next to impossible.

In spite of the fact that the Heidelberg Catechism was drafted by a committee, the evidence suggests that it still had one primary author,<sup>127</sup> most likely Zacharias Ursinus. Ursinus’s involvement in the teaching, translating, and writing of related catechisms before the Heidelberg Catechism and in the defense and exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism after its appearance all point, albeit circumstantially, to his priority in its composition.<sup>128</sup> If this was indeed the case, then Frederick could hardly have made a more prudent choice. Not only was Ursinus of the same irenic temperament as the elector, but his theological pilgrimage had exposed him to the very theological traditions he was now being called upon to reconcile. Ideologically, as well as geographically, he had made his way to Heidelberg via Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva.

The influence of Calvin on Ursinus’s mature theology has often been recognized, but what is sometimes forgotten is that Ursinus received most of his theological training and developed some of his closest friendships in Wittenberg and Zurich.<sup>129</sup> He studied and boarded with Melancthon for seven years in Wittenberg (1550–1557), where he became a lifelong friend and supporter of his mentor. He also spent time in Zurich in 1558 during a tour of various Reformation cities, and again in 1560–1561 after he had left his teaching post in Breslau. Among Zurich’s “pious, great, and learned men,” as Ursinus described them, his teacher Vermigli made perhaps the greatest impression on him,<sup>130</sup> and he often addressed Bullinger as “father.”<sup>131</sup> It should hardly surprise us, then, that scholars have detected the impact of all three of these Reformation traditions on Ursinus’s early theological works as well as

<sup>126</sup> Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 177.

<sup>127</sup> See Walter Hollweg, “Bearbeitete Caspar Olevianus den deutschen Text des Heidelberger Katechismus?” in *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche*, vol. 13, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen, 1961), 124–152.

<sup>128</sup> For a summary of the arguments supporting Ursinus’s leading role, see Klooster, “Priority of Ursinus,” 73–100. This does not mean, however, that the role of Caspar Olevianus, traditionally thought to be the co-author of the Heidelberg Catechism, was as minimal as Hollweg and Klooster suggest. See Lyle D. Bierma, “Olevianus and the Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism: Another Look,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 13/4 (1982): 17–27; and idem, “Olevianus’s *Vester Grondt* and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Later Calvinism*, 289–309.

<sup>129</sup> See Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, chapters 2–3.

<sup>130</sup> Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 124, 127.

<sup>131</sup> Visser, *Zacharias Ursinus*, 123–124.

on his mature thought.<sup>132</sup> And from Frederick's point of view, who better than Ursinus could prepare a consensus formula that bridged the differences between the representatives of these traditions in Heidelberg?

That Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 was designed to highlight areas of agreement among Melancthonians, Calvinists, and Bullingerians and down-play areas of disagreement is further confirmed by some of the reactions it elicited when the catechism was published in 1563. Representatives of all three parties endorsed it, defended it, and interpreted it as consistent with their own views of the sacraments.

None other than Heinrich Bullinger became one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Heidelberg Catechism. Both Frederick III and Heidelberg's most prominent Bullingerian, Thomas Erastus, had been in close contact with Bullinger in the years before the Heidelberg Catechism was composed,<sup>133</sup> and the drafting committee had consulted his and other Zurich catechisms in the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>134</sup> We also know from a letter from Duke Christoph of Württemberg to Count Wolfgang of Zweibrücken that delegates to the synod that approved the Heidelberg Catechism in January 1563 were given copies not only of the catechism itself but also of "a booklet by Bullinger . . . [in which] they would find the basis of their confession clearly explained."<sup>135</sup> Apparently, this book (probably either the *Summa christlicher Religion* or the *Hausbuch*<sup>136</sup>) was considered so compatible with the doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism that it served, in effect, as the first commentary on the catechism. It comes as no surprise, then, that

<sup>132</sup> For Ursinus's early theology, see Sturm, *Der junge Zacharias Ursinus*, 1–3, passim; Lang, *Der Heidelberger Katechismus*, LXIV ff.; Benrath, "Die Eigenart der Pfälzischen Reformation," 24–26; and Neuser, "Väter des Heidelberger Katechismus," 181ff.

Concerning Ursinus's mature theology, Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins*, vol. 2 of *Studies in Historical Theology* (Durham, NC, 1986), 124, concludes that "in the years between 1563 and 1577 Ursinus . . . produced a synthesis of Reformed theology with the established scholastic method, related in its central motifs not only to the thought of Calvin but also to the theology of Bullinger, Vermigli, [and] Musculus, and to that of Luther, Melancthon, and Bucer."

<sup>133</sup> See Joachim Staedtke, "Entstehung und Bedeutung des Heidelberger Katechismus," in *Warum Wirst Du Ein Christ Genannt? Vorträge und Aufsätze zum Heidelberger Katechismus im Jubiläumsjahr 1963*, ed. Walter Herrenbrück and Udo Smidt (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1963), 15–18; Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 113.

<sup>134</sup> In a letter to Bullinger on April 14, 1563, Olevianus wrote: "Certe si qua in iis [the Latin and German editions of the Heidelberg Catechism] perspicuitas, eius bonam partem tibi et candidis ingeniis Helveticorum debemus." The letter is reprinted in Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*, 482–483.

<sup>135</sup> "... exemplaria eins Bullingers buchlin . . . in selbigem buchlin . . . wurden sie die grund irer confession clerlich finden" (quoted in Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* ["Inleiding"], 24).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

when Erastus and Olevianus each sent copies of the Heidelberg Catechism to Bullinger in early 1563, the latter responded in superlatives:

I have read the Catechism of the Palatinate Elector Frederick, with the greatest interest, and while reading it I have thanked God, who establishes the work which he begins. The composition of this book is clear and its content is pure truth. All is very understandable, pious, fruitful; in concise brevity it contains a fullness of the most important doctrines. I consider it the best catechism ever published. God be praised; may he crown it with his blessing.<sup>137</sup>

Bullinger and Erastus were also among the early defenders of the doctrine of the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism. With the elector's approval, Erastus had published two treatises on the Lord's Supper, one in 1562 while the Heidelberg Catechism was still being prepared (*Gründlicher Bericht, wie das Wort Christi 'Das ist mein Leib' zu verstehen sei . . .*), and the other simultaneously with the Heidelberg Catechism in January 1563 (*Das Büchlein vom Brotbrechen*). Although the latter was not a commentary on the eucharistic teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, it did treat a significant theme in Heidelberg Catechism 75, the *fractio panis*, and thus must have been considered fully consonant with the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. When in early 1563 the strict Lutherans published an inventory of the errors they found in the Heidelberg Catechism (*Verzeichnis der Mängel*) and a refutation of Erastus's booklet on the breaking of the bread, the elector solicited responses from several quarters. Erastus himself probably prepared the reply to the attack on his own work,<sup>138</sup> and Bullinger has been suggested as the most likely author of one of the four rebuttals to the Lutheran inventory, a response in which he elaborates on and defends the Heidelberg Catechism's doctrine of the sacraments at great length.<sup>139</sup> Significantly, another of these four anonymous apologists for the Heidelberg Catechism was in all probability a Melancthonian.<sup>140</sup>

Calvin's response to the Heidelberg Catechism was more circumspect, but Klooster's recent study of Calvin's attitude toward the catechism makes a con-

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Klooster, "Calvin's Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism," 315. Klooster identifies the source of this quotation as a letter from Bullinger to a friend. The German (original?) text is quoted by Carl Pestalozzi, *Heinrich Bullinger: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 5 of *Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld, 1858), 415, and the English translation is by John Nevin, *The Heidelberg Catechism, in German, Latin and English* (New York, 1863), 58–59.

<sup>138</sup> Gooszen, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus en het Boekje*, 236ff.

<sup>139</sup> The rebuttal is found in *ibid.*, 88–111; on Bullinger's authorship of this document, see *ibid.*, 203ff.

<sup>140</sup> The apology can be found in *ibid.*, 46–87; on the anonymous author see *ibid.*, 207–208.



vincing circumstantial case for the Genevan's full approval.<sup>141</sup> Calvin had intended to dedicate the 1559 *Institutes* to Frederick III but was advised that such a strong endorsement could do the elector political harm at such an early stage in his reign. Instead, four years later Calvin dedicated his lectures on Jeremiah to the elector, eight months after the Heidelberg Catechism was published and three months after Olevianus had sent him a copy of the Latin translation of the catechism. Calvin never mentions the Heidelberg Catechism by name in the dedicatory address, but he expresses the highest esteem for both Frederick and the reforms he had undertaken in the Palatinate, never denying and even implying that the elector is deserving of the charge of "Calvinism" being leveled against him.

What is especially interesting in these reactions to the Heidelberg Catechism is how the anonymous Melanchthonian apologist, Bullinger, and Calvin all interpret Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 as consistent with the angularities of their own sacramental doctrines. According to the Philippist, who at one point identifies the words of the Heidelberg Catechism as those of Melancthon himself,<sup>142</sup> the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that "in baptism [regeneration and forgiveness of sins] are offered and received through the operation of the Holy Spirit."<sup>143</sup> In actual fact, the Heidelberg Catechism never explicitly teaches this, and someone like Bullinger would have been shocked to hear that it does.<sup>144</sup> In his own defense of the Heidelberg Catechism, Bullinger grants that, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, the sacraments are "means and tools by which God effects our salvation in us" but only in the sense that "God uses them to seal in us the promise of the gospel and to testify by them that he gives us forgiveness of sins and eternal life."<sup>145</sup> This is quite a different interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism from that of the Philippist: the sacraments are not the means themselves in which or through which the benefits of Christ are offered to and received by believers;

<sup>141</sup> Klooster, "Calvin's Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism," 311–331.

<sup>142</sup> "Das hie aber gesagt würdt de physica locatione dess Leibs Christi im Himmel, darüber mögen die Censores mit dem frommen Domino Philippo Melanchtone seligen gedechtnus zanken, dann dass sein seine und nicht dess Catechismi wort" ("Eerste Anti-kritiek," in Gooszen, *Heidelbergische Catechismus en het Boekje*, 75; see also p. 55).

<sup>143</sup> "So werden [regeneratio unnd die vergebung der Sunden] dannocht im Tauff angeboten und durch die würckhung des hailigen Gaists empfangen" (*ibid.*, 80).

<sup>144</sup> Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 86, points out that in Article 9 of the *Consensus Tigurinus*, for example, Bullinger changed Calvin's original wording "quite substantially . . . by omitting [Calvin's] insistence that what is signified and promised is in fact fulfilled and presented in the sacrament. . . ."

<sup>145</sup> "Seind es dann nit mittel unnd werckzeug, durch welliche got in unns unser hail würrcht? . . . er sie darzu gebrauche, das er unns die verhaissung des Evangelions versigle, auch mit inen bezeugen, das er uns vergebung der sunden unnd ewigs leben schencke" ("Tweede Anti-kritiek," in Gooszen, *Heidelbergische Catechismus en het Boekje*, 99–100).

they only illustrate and assure us of the promise that God communicates these benefits.

Calvin, too, interprets the Heidelberg Catechism in a predictably “Calvinist” manner. In his dedicatory preface to Frederick III in the lectures on Jeremiah, Calvin notes that the elector has “reverently embraced the sound and orthodox doctrine concerning the Holy Supper of Christ, and [has] not hesitated freely and wisely to avow the same in [his] dominion.”<sup>146</sup> This statement most likely contains a subtle reference to the Heidelberg Catechism. Calvin goes on, however, to describe this “orthodox doctrine concerning the Holy Supper” as including the communication of the “*substance* of Christ’s body and blood . . . *under the symbols* of bread and wine.”<sup>147</sup> Once again, this is not the direct teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism; the Heidelberg Catechism never uses the term “substance” nor makes explicit how Christ’s body and blood are related to the signs of the Lord’s Supper. What we have here is Calvin’s interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching—an interpretation that a Melancthonian might accept but that goes considerably beyond Calvin’s agreement with Bullinger in the Zurich Consensus fourteen years earlier.<sup>148</sup>

In none of the cases above can we say that the Heidelberg Catechism was interpreted incorrectly; each is a legitimate reading of the text. The Heidelberg Catechism allows for all of these interpretations but demands none of them. This strongly suggests that Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 was designed in such a way as to allow latitude on such controversial sacramental matters as the relation of sign and signified. That the Heidelberg Catechism could be defended by Bullinger, Calvin, and a Melancthonian alike and yet interpreted by them in such different ways is yet one more indication that the focus of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 on areas of consensus was part of a deliberate strategy by Frederick III to consolidate the moderate parties in his realm. The exquisite weave of his catechetical tapestry was no accident.

<sup>146</sup> The English translation here is from *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen, 5 vols. (Edinburgh, 1850; reprint, Grand Rapids, 1950), 1: xvi (CO 20:72), quoted in Klooster, “Calvin’s Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism,” 324.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: xvii (CO 20:73), quoted in Klooster, “Calvin’s Attitude to the Heidelberg Catechism,” 326 (italics added).

<sup>148</sup> As early as a year after the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus, too, spoke of the communication of Christ’s substance in the Lord’s Supper: “[In the Lord’s Supper Christ makes us partakers] nicht allein seines verdiensts, sonder auch sein selbst, das ist, seiner person, substantz und wesens” (*Gründtlicher bericht, vom heiligen Abendmal unsers Herren Jesu Christi* . . . [Heidelberg, 1564], 21v, quoted in Gooszen, *Heidelbergische Catechismus en het Bockje*, 263).





## V

### Summary and Conclusions

The Heidelberg Catechism is widely recognized today as "the most ecumenical and most loved of all the Reformed catechisms and confessions,"<sup>149</sup> even "the most irenic and catholic expression of the Christian faith to come out of the Reformation."<sup>150</sup> According to one student of the catechism, the genius of Ursinus's work was that he was able to take the common essentials in the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Zwinglian traditions, omit most of what had provoked disagreement among them, and still produce a fresh and original document.<sup>151</sup> For some reason, however, this assessment of the "ecumenicity" of the Heidelberg Catechism has not included its doctrine of the sacraments. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, scholars have continued to debate whether the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the sacraments is essentially Melancthonian, Zwinglian, late-Zwinglian (Bullingerian), Calvinist, or some combination of these traditions.

It is the conclusion of this study that the irenic and catholic spirit of the Heidelberg Catechism extends also to its doctrine of the sacraments. The sacramental teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism reflects neither a specific doctrinal slant, nor a "fluctuation" between two traditions (Zwinglianism and Calvinism),<sup>152</sup> nor even a hybrid of several "completely heterogeneous" influences.<sup>153</sup> What past scholarship has identified in Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 as its distinctively Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Bullingerian features are in fact characteristic of one or both of the other traditions as well. And on

<sup>149</sup> Klooster, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 120.

<sup>150</sup> I. John Hesslink, "The Dramatic Story of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *Later Calvinism*, 288.

<sup>151</sup> Howard Hageman, "The Lasting Significance of Ursinus," in *Controversy and Conciliation*, ed. Visser, 229, 230.

<sup>152</sup> Rohls, *Theologie reformierter Bekenntnisschriften*, 24–25.

<sup>153</sup> Neuser, "Erwählungslehre im Heidelberger Katechismus," 310.

those sacramental issues on which these Protestant families had previously quarreled, the catechism passes by in silence. Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 incorporates only those aspects of sacramental teaching that sixteenth-century Philippists, Calvinists, and Bullingerians held in common and that could not easily be labelled or traced to a particular theological source.

This emphasis on common ground appears from the historical context to have been deliberate. The sponsor of the Heidelberg Catechism, Frederick III, had developed a conciliatory spirit and a dislike of theological labels already before he became elector of the Palatinate, and this disposition helped to shape the Palatinate Reformation in the years immediately before and after the Heidelberg Catechism was published. Distancing himself from the strict Lutherans on the theological right, Frederick found himself in the delicate position of trying to achieve confessional unity among the Melanchthonians, late-Zwinglians, and Calvinists in his realm without appearing to violate those provisions of the Peace of Augsburg that outlawed Zwinglianism and Calvinism in the German Empire. The issue on which much of this unity and political survival hinged was the doctrine of the sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper. There is one person, therefore, who would have understood the modern confusion about the theological ancestry of Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 better than anyone else—Elector Frederick III. The identification of the Heidelberg Catechism with a particular branch of Protestantism was precisely what he was seeking to avoid.

The doctrine of the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism—is it then Melanchthonian, Calvinist, or (late-)Zwinglian? In the last analysis, it is none of these and it is all three. Situated in the middle of the spectrum of Protestant opinion, the Heidelberg Catechism's position on the sacraments was broad enough to encompass the whole range of views that lay between Zwingli on the left and the strict Lutherans on the right. If one still insists upon a label, Heidelberg Catechism 65–82 might best be called the *Consensus Heidelbergensis*.

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